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Islamic Perspectives on Interfaith Understanding and Religious Tolerance in Yoruba Land

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Abstract
This paper explores the Islamic perspectives on interfaith understanding and religious tolerance in Yoruba Land. The Yoruba people of Nigeria have a rich history and culture, including their diverse religious beliefs and practices. Islam, as one of the major religions in Yoruba Land, has played a significant role in shaping the religious landscape, fostering interfaith understanding and promoting religious tolerance among the different religious groups in the region. Yoruba people have regarded religion as an aspect of culture that required no controversy or competition and in spite of numerous differences that exist among Yoruba-speaking areas, like Lagos, Oyo, Ibadan, Benin, Ilesha, Ile Ife, Egba, and Ekiti, they normally interact socially, economically, educationally and religiously. They practice religious freedom to a fault remaining the most tolerant community of every religious belief in Nigeria. Through a thorough analysis and research. This paper will provide insights into the different aspects of religious understanding and tolerance in Yoruba Land, specifically from Islamic viewpoints. This paper in its findings reveal how generous the people of Yoruba-land in religious understanding and tolerance and provide the stands and the principles guiding the interactions between Muslims and people of other religions. The paper concludes with some suggestions and recommendations, and the methodology applied for this study included analytical and historical approaches, while library sources were also extensively utilized as a tool of sourcing for information.

Keywords: *Interactions, Islam, Limitation, Religions, Tolerance.*

Introduction

The Yoruba Land is an area in West Africa that covers several countries, including Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. This study aimed to analyze the concept of interfaith understanding and religious tolerance in Yoruba Land within the context of Nigeria. The Yoruba people in Nigeria have a rich history and cultural diversity that allowed them to thrive for centuries. This land is known for its vibrant cities, stunning landscapes, and unique traditions. Some notable areas within Yoruba Land include the ancient city of Ile-Ife, Lagos, Oyo, Ibadan,

Benin, Ilesha, Ile Ife, Egba, and Ekiti. [1] The Yoruba Land is also home to many universities, such as the University of Lagos and the Obafemi Awolowo University, which attract students and scholars from all over the world.

The study of religious understanding and tolerance in Yoruba-land is an important aspect of social and cultural dynamics. It explores the complex relationship between different religious beliefs and practices within the Yoruba community, with a focus on promoting tolerance and understanding. This study delves into the historical, sociological, and cultural factors that shape the religious landscape in Yoruba-land and examines how these factors contribute to the level of religious understanding and tolerance among its people.

Islam is a religion of (Rahmah) mercy, love and compassion for the whole universe, irrespective of their race, ethnics, color and creed. Religious understanding and tolerance are manifest in all aspects of Islamic ethics as well as in every measure taken by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). He extended compassionate treatment to the adherents of other religions as cordially as to the Muslims. [2]

Yoruba land has a long history of religious diversity. Traditional Yoruba religion, which revolves around the worship of Orishas and ancestral veneration, has coexisted with Islam, introduced in the 11th century, and Christianity, which gained prominence in the 19th century. This historical backdrop has fostered an environment of tolerance and acceptance among different beliefs.

In this study the emphasis will be laid on the religious understanding and tolerance within the context of Islam. Also, on the different interpretations of religious texts and how they impact individuals' perceptions of tolerance. The societal and cultural limitations that can affect religious tolerance within the Islamic community will be analyzed. The findings of this study provide insights into the complex dynamics of religious understanding and tolerance in Islam and offer potential solutions for fostering more inclusive and accepting communities in Islamic perspective.

The Basis of Religious Understanding and Tolerance in Islam

It is pertinent against the principles of Islam to impose its doctrines on unwilling minds and compel them to embrace or observe Islamic rites and rituals. The glorious Quran does not approve forceful conversion. God Almighty says:

"Let there be no compulsion In religion: truth stands out Clear from error: Whoever rejects evil and believes In Allah hath grasped the Most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. and Allah heareth and knoweth all things."[3]

There is not compulsion in religion. Islam believes in nonviolent ways such as discussion and dialogue and gives paramount significance to cogent argumentation in which Allah says:

[1] B. Idowu, Olodumare, *God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 5.

[2] Sabooni, Muhammad Ali, *Rwa'eul Bayaan, Qadimi Kutub Khana* (Beirut Lebanon 2002) .162

[3] Al Quran 2:256.

"Invite (all) to the way of Thy Lord with wisdom and preaching; and argue with them In ways that are best and Most gracious: for Thy knoweth best, who have strayed from His path, and who receive guidance."[4]

The Glorious Quran also advocates religious freedom:

1. Say: O ye that reject Faith!
2. I worship not that which ye worship,
3. Nor will ye worship that which I worship.
4. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship,
5. Nor will ye worship that which I worship.
6. To you be your way, and to me mine.

The Glorious Qur'an further advises the prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessing of Allah be upon him) to stick to justice, refrain from reviling the gods and deities of other religions and leave the ultimate consequences to the God Almighty:
"Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, Lest They out of spite Revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus, have we made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and we shall then tell them the truth of all that they did."[5]
The above verses from the holy Quran substantiate the claim that the tolerant attitude of Islam is deeply rooted in its scriptures. On the contrary, religious intolerance, extremism and violence run counter to the teachings of the Glorious Quran.

Religions understanding and Tolerance in the History of Islam

The prophet Muhammad (SAW) in all his activities demonstrated the Islamic teachings of peaceful co-existence and tolerance. Examples of the prophetic actions as revealed by the glorious Quran is the following verses:
2. The Roman Empire has been defeated-

1. 3. In a land close by; but they, (Even) after (this) defeat of theirs,
2. will soon be victorious-
3. Within a few years. with Allah is the decision, In the past and in the
4. Future: on that Day shall the believers rejoice-
5. With the help of Allah. He helps whom He will, and He is Exalted
6. In Might, Most Merciful.[6]

The above verses revealed mutual relationship of the Prophet with all other beings including non-Muslims is the support, the prophet and his followers gave to the roman Christians over their Persian adversaries, his friendly relation with Christian Abyssinia as well as his reception and hospitality given to the Christian delegation.
The prophet [SAW] is the embodiment of clemency as Allah commands him:

[4] Al Quran 16:125
[5] Al Quran 6:108
[6] Al Quran 30:2-5

"And we have not sent you but as a mercy to all the worlds."[7]

The Prophet (SAW) treated non-Muslims of Madinah in the same way as he treated the Muslims. He never inflicted pain on them with a view to converting them to the fold of Islam. It was the indelible influence of his teachings and practices that Muslim rulers allowed Jewish communities to flourish under their rule. [8]

This practical demonstration of the prophet is in line with the Madinah constitution, which he promulgated to guarantee the fundamental right of both Muslims and non-Muslims. It is also pertinent to be mentioned that during and throughout the jihad [wars], the prophet forbids his followers from attacking non-combatants, religious person, women, and children, as he forbids destroying trees and farm lands. [9]

It is clearly stated in the Quran that those who love Islam most among non-Muslims will be found among the Christians, so, how can the Islamic faith call for indiscrimination fighting of non-Muslim.

"Among men in enmity to the believers wilt Thou find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt Thou find those who say, "We are Christians": because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and They are not arrogant."[10]

The Islamic interfaith understanding and tolerance that manifested in Muslims' attitude towards other religious communities have been admired and appreciated by even non-Muslims. Patriarch Ghaytho generously admits that the Arabs who wielded the political sway treated the Christian citizens of the state in a very friendly manner. [11] He further remarks that the Arab rulers appreciated the Christian components of the society and held their priests and saints in high esteem. Moreover, they offered financial aid for their monasteries and churches.

Similarly, Karen Armstrong appreciates the tolerance and peace that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) brought after the conquest of Mecca.

He does not regard this conquest as a military victory but conquest of Mecca was a splendid dawn of a new era of peace, tolerance and love. [12]

Karen quotes Muhammad's (peace be upon him) recitation of the following verse:

"O mankind! we created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and Tribes, that ye may know Each other (Not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the Most honoured of you In the sight of Allah is (He who is) the Most righteous of you. and Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)."[13]

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[7] Al Quran 21:107

[8] Will Durant, The Story of Civilization, vol. 13 (New Your: Brill, 1986), 131–132.

[9] Ibid

[10] Al Quran 5:82

[11] Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad* (Regency Publishing, Inc.), 11.

[12] Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad a Prophet for Our Time* (Harper Collins, 2006), 7.

[13] Al Quran 49:13

During the reign of the Umayyad Dynasty, the level of tolerance exhibited and maintained by the Muslim rulers towards non-Muslim subjects is of high esteem, where substantial measures were taken to preserve and maintain the temples and churches and the non-Muslim citizens of the state enjoyed their freedom to practice their ritual in accordance with their religious doctrines and they were declared autonomous in being subject to their religious laws of judges. [14]

Religious Understanding and Tolerance in Yoruba-Land

When it comes to religion, the Yoruba communities in Nigeria practice religious freedom to a fault remaining the most tolerant community of every religious belief in Nigeria if not in the world. It may not be wise to say that because of the absence of any endorsement of such a position by a global body like the United Nations. But having read books about several peoples of the world, I can comfortably say that I have not seen or heard of any country or people that tolerate one another on the issue of religion like the Yoruba of Nigeria.

In several occasions the Aare ona kakanfo of Yoruba land, Iba Gani Adams, urged all believers of the three prominent religions to tolerate one another, saying "religious tolerance was key to the progress of Yorubaland and Nigeria as a whole" [15].

Iba Adams made this call while speaking at the 2025 edition of the Thanksgiving Programme organized by the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), which took place at Oodua House, Ikeja, Lagos, restating the need for religious tolerance:

> Religion is very sensitive; therefore, I am appealing to all believers of the three prominent religions, the Muslims, Christians and the traditional believers to tolerate one another and embrace peace as that is key to the progress of Yoruba land and Nigeria as a whole. OPC is a Yoruba socio-cultural organization that preaches religious tolerance. As the leader of the organization and several others both in Nigeria and in the diaspora, I will be the last person to undermine any of the religions. I will be the last person that will denigrate Yoruba culture and tradition because I also believe strongly that religious tolerance and liberalism is the best that can help us out in Yoruba land. [16]

Yoruba make love and marry across religious lines. As much as other communities are obsessed with religious superiority or inferiority complex, although this type of feelings also exists among Yoruba communities but at a minimum rate. In the same nuclear and extended family amongst Yoruba, are people of different faiths and religions. For example, in a typical Yoruba family. [17] A couple with Four children could have deferent beliefs as follows: the husband is a Muslim; the wife is a Christian; the first child started as a Muslim and later converted to Christianity; the second child is a devout Muslim; the third is a Christian and the fourth child attends no church or mosque but prefers the Yoruba

[14] Muhammad Ali, Rwa'eul Bayaan Sabooni, *Qadimi Kutub Khana*,163.
[15] Gani Adams, *Religious tolerance key to progress of Yorubaland*, Nigerian Tribune 21/ Jan./ 2025.
[16] Ibid
[17] Dada, O. "Yoruba Religion and Traditional Medicine in Egbeland". Unpublished B. A. Dissertation, submitted to the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin. (2012), 54.

traditional religion. Apparently, with this seemingly cacophony of religions, one would assume that there would be constant religious tension, hatred and fights in that family. But no one disturbs other in name of religion.

The advantage of this religious freedom is that Yoruba have been able to get along without holy war in the name of Crusade or Jihad. Instead of war, the freedom exists in Yoruba communities point to the religious freedom enjoyed. [18] The Yoruba people often practice a form of syncretism, blending elements from their traditional religion with Christianity and Islam[19]. For example, during Islamic festivals, Christians join their Muslim relatives to celebrate. Also, during Christian festivals, the Muslims join their relatives to celebrate. Sometimes, it may be difficult to know the certain that some people actuarially belong to, out of the three religions.

This religious blending is evident in cultural practices, festivals, and rituals, where the participants incorporate aspects of different faiths. This practice in Yoruba communities promote mutual respect and understanding among different religious groups. Interestingly, in the larger Yoruba society, the issue of religion is not a factor when considering candidates for elective posts in the State. For example, The Governor of a state can be a Muslim while the deputy is a Christian or vice-versa unlike other communities in this country where they always agitate for Muslim-Muslim or Christian-Christian.[20] Furthermore, Yoruba people believe in interfaith Relations and prominent religious leaders in Yoruba land often engage in interfaith dialogues in order to promote understanding and cooperation. These discussions facilitate joint celebrations and community service projects, emphasizing the common values shared by different faiths. Such high level of religious understanding does not obtainable in other countries in African not even in those countries that are known for religious pluralism, freedom and rights like the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Finally, it is pertinent to mention at this juncture the present religious confrontation between Islam, Christianity and Yoruba traditional religions which shakes the already existence peace, stability and tolerance in Yoruba Land. This Religious confrontation and competition, between Islam, Christianity, and Yoruba Traditional Religion, are key factors contributing to religious problems in Yoruba land. This issue is often fueled by religious extremism and fundamentalism with some individuals and groups actively promoting their faith through aggressive means.

Islam generally emphasizes respect and tolerance towards followers of other religions, particularly those considered "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians). The Quran and Islamic teachings encourage kindness, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence with people of different faiths. Allah command Muslim not to revile the people of other religions thus:

[18] Farouk Martins Aresa, accessed on 2nd July, 2025

[19] Ibid

[20] 1. B. Idowu, Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief (London, Longmans, 1962), 5.

"Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, Lest They out of spite Revile Allah on their ignorance. Thus, have we made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and we shall then tell them the truth of all that they did."[21]

Limitations on Religious Freedom in Islam

The Qur'an contains many verses that revealed in both the Meccan and Medinan periods which, uphold the right to freedom of religion as we have emphasized. These verses recognize each individual's right to believe or not to believe in God and Prophet Muhammad respected this right throughout his life.

However, traditional Islamic law and theology developed a range of limitations on this freedom and tolerance during the post-prophetic period on the premise of the protection of religion (hifz al-din). Andrew March summarizes this concept:

> Religion consists of divine rules which God has revealed through prophets to guide mankind to truth in matters of belief and to good in matters of behavior and social relations. Religion constrains mankind by these rules and brings them into submission to their commands and prohibitions so that they may attain the happiness of this world and the next. [22]

The most notable of these limitations are the laws relating to:

i. Apostasy **الردّة**

ii. Hypocrisy **النفاق**

iii. Blasphemy and **كلمة الكفر**

iv. Heresy. **البدعة**

Apostasy

Apostasy is known as (Ridda) it occurs when a Muslim by his words or actions renounces and rejects Islam. Allah Himself or His Prophet. It involves abandoning Islam and embracing another religion or disbelief. The term can also refer to the act of returning to a state of disbelief or non-belief. [23] Allah says:

"Anyone who, after accepting Faith in Allah, utters except under compulsion, His heart remaining firm In Faith - but such As open breast to Unbelief, on them is wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful."[24]

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[21] Al Quran 108

[22] Human Relations Area Files, (New Haven Connecticut, 1976) Yoruba Language 197.

[23] Limitations on Religious Freedom in Islam: The Witness of the Qur'an and Prophetic Traditions https://www.abc.net.au/religion/limitations-on-religious-freedom-in-islam-the-witness-of-the-qur/10099250m, accessed on 2nd July 2025.

[24] Al Quran 16:106

In line with the notion of protection of religion, (Hifdhd-Deen) conversion from Islam to another religion (apostasy) was not considered a tolerance or right from the jurists' point of view. Indeed, most jurists considered it as a crime. [25] For them, Islam is the only valid religion and its authority and authenticity are beyond doubt: having recognized this, a Muslim should not even contemplate leaving Islam. From this perspective, an individual leaving Islam is considered to be following a path that will ultimately lead him to eternal damnation in hell, which calls for community intervention.

Hypocrisy

In Islam, hypocrisy (nifaq) refers to the act of exhibiting outward religious behavior while concealing disbelief or insincerity in one's heart. It involves pretending to be a true believer or pious individual while harboring doubts or holding opposing beliefs. [26] Hypocrisy is considered a serious spiritual disease in Islam, and the Quran and Hadith (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad) strongly condemn it. [27] Allah says:

"Of the people there are some who say: "We believe In Allah and the Last Day;" but They do not (really) believe."[28]

In another verse He says:

> When They meet those who believe, They say: "We believe;" but when They are alone with their evil ones, They say: "We are really with you: we (were) only jesting.[29]

Types of hypocrisy

- Hypocrisy towards God regarding actual faith.
- Hypocrisy towards the tenets of faith: for example, somebody may believe in God, Judgment Day, accounting, scales of deeds and Hellfire but not fear them at all or not refrain from committing sins because of them. Yet he claims, "I fear God".
- Hypocrisy towards the deeds: Not performing obligatory works properly.
- Hypocrisy towards others: somebody is double-faced and double-tongued. He praises someone in their presence, then, behind their back, he denounces them and tries to cause them pain and harm. [30]

Blasphemy

Blasphemy is defined as the act of speaking disrespectfully or irreverently about God and there is every other thing you can do to Cause blasphemy A specific example of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit occurs when someone attributes the good works of God (such as miracles) to Satan. [31]

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[25] Ibid

[26] https://www.abc.net.au/religion/limitations-on-religious-freedom-in-islam-the-witness-of-the-qur/10099250m, accessed on 2nd July 2025.

[27] Ibid

[28] Al Quran 2:8

[29] Al Quran 2:14

[30] Ibid

[31] Muhammad B. i. *Alfiqh al-Wadih Minal0Kitab was-Sunnah Alal-Madhahibil-Arba'a* (Darl-

In the Quran, blasphemy is addressed as insults or ridicule directed towards God, the prophets, or the divine revelations. While the Quran does not prescribe specific punishments for blasphemy, it emphasizes forgiveness, patience, and turning away from those who engage in offensive discourse.

Heresy

In Islam, heresy, often referred to as Bid'ah (Innovation) generally involves beliefs or practices that contradict core Islamic teachings in the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad or the consensus of Muslim scholars. [32] It can also involve misinterpreting or distorting Islamic principles. While the concept of heresy exists, declaring someone a heretic is a serious matter which implies a deviation that can be considered a serious offense, potentially leading to accusations of apostasy (leaving Islam). [33]

Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up here, considering the fore-going discussions, Yoruba land is renowned for its high level of religious understanding and tolerance, characterized by peaceful coexistence among different faiths, including Islam, Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion. This religious understanding is deeply ingrained in Yoruba culture and is evident in families and communities where individuals practice diverse religions without experiencing significant conflict. [34]

Islam is a religion that recognizes the freedom of thought and faith while there is no single incidence where force is used to convert others to Islam throughout the history. Thus, any person feels and willingly accepts it, is not allowed to go out again to commit apostasy, hypocrisy, blasphemy or heresy.

On this note, the following recommendation suggested:

Muslims in Yoruba Land when observing religious understanding and tolerance should always recollect the injunction of Allah in the Glorious Quran concerning the total submission ans complete devotion and dedication to Islam thus:

"O ye who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly; and follow not the footsteps of the evil one; for He is to you an avowed enemy."[35]

The Muslim scholars should create awareness among the Yoruba community and proper religious teachings in our Gathering, Mosques even on social media instead of counter attitude, abusive utterances and reviling statements between the people of different faith on social media.

People of different faiths should respect the Constitution of each religion and allow everyone to practice the doctrine iof his religion in accordance with the rules and regulation of his religion.

Manar, Cairo, 1997), 26-27.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Farouk Martins Aresa, accessed on 2nd July, 2025.

[35] Al Quran 2:208