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The Salafiyyah Movement in South-Western Nigeria: Contributions, Challenges, and Contemporary Significance

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Salafiyyah movement has emerged as a significant Islamic reform orientation in South-Western Nigeria, influencing religious thought, education, and inter-group relations. Despite its visibility, scholarly analysis of its historical development, internal dynamics, and societal impact remains limited. **Objective:** This study investigates the emergence, teachings, activities, contributions, and challenges of the Salafiyyah movement in the region. **Method:** A qualitative case study design was adopted, integrating library research and fieldwork. Data were collected through oral interviews, questionnaires, and review of published and unpublished materials, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. A multidisciplinary analytical framework combining historical, phenomenological, and sociological approaches was employed. **Result:** The findings indicate that Salafiyyah has contributed substantially to Islamic scholarship, Qur'anic memorization, the establishment of madāris and mosques, educational development, and structured da'wah activities. However, the movement also faces factional divisions and sustained debates with other Islamic groups over doctrinal and organizational issues. **Conclusion:** Salafiyyah remains a dynamic and influential reform movement in South-Western Nigeria. **Contribution:** This research contributes to existing literature by providing a systematic, context-based analysis of Salafiyyah's contemporary significance within a pluralistic Muslim society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores the contributions and challenges of the Salafiyyah movement in the South-Western geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Salafiyyah has existed in Nigeria for a considerable period, as some early Islamic scholars had preached what they regarded as pure and pristine Islam before 1970 (Oloyede, 2015). However, the movement gained wider popularity in Nigeria, particularly in Osun State, through the efforts of Muslim scholars who studied in Saudi Arabia. The movement's spread intensified when many of these scholars returned home after completing their studies in the early 1970s. In contemporary times, both globally and within Osun State in South-Western Nigeria, Salafi theological beliefs, polemics, doctrines, activities, and reformist orientations have often brought the movement into debates, strong opposition, and, at times, conflict with other Muslim groups (Balogun, 2019). These include Sufi orders, Islamic organizations, Sunnis, and various Muslim brotherhoods operating within Osun State and beyond. Presently, there is a persistent clash of interests and ideological debates between Salafis and other Muslim groups,

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largely arising from divergent understandings and interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah as authentic sources of Islamic doctrine.

The term Salafiyyah is derived from the Arabic word Salaf, meaning the people of the past or ancestors. The Salaf are understood as those who received the message of Islam directly as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Although the term Salafiyyah and its activities may appear strange to many Muslims in the contemporary world, and despite existing misconceptions surrounding it, the movement is not new (Salami, 2015). Rather, it represents the religious practices and modes of life of the early Muslims. Salafi Muslims are therefore those who seek to revive the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad in acts of worship, conduct, and daily life, sometimes to the extent that their lifestyle appears unusual to other Muslims. In this regard, they are often regarded as strangers within the Muslim community, in line with the Prophetic tradition reported by Al-Hakami: "Islam began as something strange, and it will return to being strange as it began" (Sunan Ibn Mājah, 3986).

In contemporary society, many Muslims have become negligent in certain acts of worship, which contributes to the perception of Salafiyyah practices as unfamiliar. As a result, Salafiyyah groups are often viewed as one of the largest and most influential revivalist trends in the modern era, with a presence in more than seventy countries worldwide, including Nigeria in general and Osun State in particular (Thurston, 2024). The limited availability of scholarly research on Salafiyyah beliefs, practices, and adherents has further contributed to misunderstandings surrounding the movement. It is therefore important to note that Salafiyyah commands a significant following across the Muslim world, including Nigeria, with substantial support from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, widely regarded as a major centre of Salafi thought (Arikewuyo, 2019, p. 2).

The term Salaf broadly refers to the first three generations of Muslims, known in Arabic as al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ, whom Salafiyyah adherents idealize as a perfect Islamic community and a model for future generations (Abdulmajid, 2023). The Salafiyyah approach emphasises a return to the sources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah. It upholds what is perceived as pure and unadulterated Islam as conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad through divine revelation. According to Salafi thought, deviations emerged over time as Muslims introduced practices not sanctioned by the Prophet, such as usury, veneration of graves, hero worship, and sectarian excesses related to early Islamic leadership. Salafiyyah ideology, therefore, opposes these practices and stresses a return to Islam as practised by the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, and the first three generations of Muslims.

South-Western Nigeria is not exempt from the intellectual, ideological, and practical influence of Salafiyyah movements. Against this background, the present study examines the ideology, emergence, development, and activities of Salafiyyah movements, as well as their impact on Muslims in the South-Western geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

This study aims to examine the development, teachings, activities, contributions, and challenges of the Salafiyyah movement in South-Western Nigeria, and to analyse its influence on the religious, social, and intellectual life of Muslims in the region. It also seeks to explore the interactions and debates between the Salafiyyah movement and other Islamic groups, to provide a clearer understanding of its role and significance in shaping contemporary Islamic thought and practice in South-Western Nigeria.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the Salafiyyah movement in South-Western Nigeria. The case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific religious movement within its real-life social, historical, and cultural context. The design enabled the researcher to investigate the movement's emergence, doctrinal orientation, activities, contributions, and contemporary challenges holistically. The study combined library research and field research. The library component involved reviewing classical Islamic texts, academic books, journal articles, theses, and relevant historical documents. The field component focused on gathering first-hand data from participants directly involved in or knowledgeable about the Salafiyyah movement.

2.2 Research Object

The study's subjects were key stakeholders within the Salafiyyah movement and related Islamic groups in South-Western Nigeria. They included: 1) Salafiyyah scholars and preachers; 2) Leaders of various Salafiyyah factions; 3) Members and adherents of the movement; 4) Selected scholars from other Islamic organisations for comparative perspectives. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This technique was chosen to ensure that individuals with relevant knowledge, experience, and involvement in Salafiyyah activities were included.

The selection emphasised scholars, community leaders, and long-term adherents who could provide reliable historical and doctrinal insights.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through: 1) Semi-structured oral interviews with scholars, leaders, and members of Salafiyyah groups; 2) Direct field observations of religious activities, including da'wah programs and study circles (*ḥalāqāt*). Interviews were conducted in person and focused on historical development, ideological positions, factional dynamics, and contemporary challenges. Responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Secondary data were gathered from: 1) Published academic works; 2) Classical Islamic texts; 3) Conference papers; 4) Theses and dissertations; 5) Archival and institutional documents. These sources were used to support, validate, and contextualise findings from field data.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative analytical methods. The study adopted a multidisciplinary analytical framework combining: 1) Historical analysis to trace the emergence and development of the Salafiyyah movement in South-Western Nigeria; 2) Descriptive analysis, to present the activities, organisational patterns, and factional structures of the movement; 3) Thematic analysis, to identify recurring themes from interview transcripts, such as doctrinal disputes, youth activism, inter-group tensions, and da'wah strategies; 4) Comparative analysis, to examine differences among Salafiyyah factions and between Salafiyyah and other Islamic organisations.

Data were categorised, coded, and interpreted systematically to ensure coherence and analytical rigour. Triangulation of primary and secondary sources was applied to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

a) The concept of *Salafiyyah*

The concept *Salafiyyah* is derived from the word *Salaf*, which literally means predecessors or ancestors. It refers to the early generations of Muslims; later generations regarded as the most authoritative sources of Islamic practice and guidance. The term *Salaf* is traced to the first three generations of Islam, who exerted significant efforts in spreading the message of Islam. They witnessed the revelation of the Qur'an and demonstrated excellence in understanding its meanings.

An examination of the usage of the word *Salaf* in the Qur'an shows that it appears eight times in seven chapters with the literal meanings of past actions or preceding occurrences, as outlined in Q2:275, Q4:22, Q5:95, Q10:30, Q43:56, Q69:24, and Q78:38. The word was also used by the Prophet Muhammad in his communication with his daughter Fatimah when he said, "And I am to you a good predecessor" (Sahih Muslim, no. 3450). From the Qur'anic and Prophetic usage, it is evident that the term's technical meaning was not originally intended, as it did not explicitly refer to the pious Salaf. However, in technical usage, *Salaf* refers to the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad and those who followed them faithfully in their beliefs and practices. They were the most reliable recipients of what they heard directly from the Prophet.

In Qur'an chapter 9, verse 100, Allah describes them thus:

وَالسَّابِقُونَ الْأُولُونَ مِنَ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ وَالْأَنْصَارِ وَالَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُمْ بِإِحْسَانٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ

"And the foremost to embrace Islam from among the Muhajirun and the Ansar, and those who followed them with excellence, Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him..."

This verse refers to the Salaf, namely those who supported the Prophet, showed loyalty to him, and were content with Islam.

The Salaf or Salafiyyah covers three generations: the Companions of the Prophet, the *Tābi'ūn*, who met and learned from the Companions, and the *Taba' al-Tābi 'īn*, the successors of the *Tābi'ūn*. Each successive generation is considered less authoritative than the one before it. Salafiyyah also implies a return to the sources of Islam, namely, strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Salafiyyah holds Hadith in high esteem because Hadith provides detailed explanations of the Qur'an. Many Salafi scholars devoted their lives to verifying the authenticity of Hadith, both in terms of *matn* and *isnad*. *Matn* refers to

the actual text of the Hadith, while *isnad* refers to the chain of transmission. The critical study of transmitters is known as *‘Ilm Asma’ al-Rijal*. All Muslims derive guidance from the life of the Prophet Muhammad as understood and transmitted by his Companions. The Prophet provided comprehensive guidance for addressing religious, social, political, and economic matters across time. Salafiyyah follows the methodology of the Salaf in worship and in all religious practices.

Salafiyyah as a religious orientation emerged from the very foundations of Islam itself. This is further reinforced by the fact that the Prophet Muhammad is also described as a Salaf, as narrated by Fatimah bint Muhammad, who reported that during the illness preceding his death, the Prophet said to her, “Fear Allah and be patient, for I am the best Salaf for you” (Sahih al-Bukhari, 7285). In this sense, the Prophet addressed himself as a Salaf for his daughter and, by extension, for the Muslim community. Salafiyyah, therefore, represents the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad and the methodological and ideological paths of his Companions and early traditional scholars who followed them in creed and practice (Arikewuyo, 2019). It emerged from the desire to reform existing realities and to remodel the present in the image of the early Islamic community, thereby actualising the Islamic vision exemplified by the Prophet and his Companions (Chaplin, 2014). In summary, Salafiyyah is the continuation of the methodology of the Companions and the first three generations of Muslims in perfecting religious practice through strict adherence to the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

b) Historical Development of Salafiyyah Movements in the Southwestern Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

The 1970s are widely regarded as the formative stage for the emergence of Salafiyyah in Yoruba land. Three main factors can support this position. First, the decade marked the beginning of unprecedented official funding of Salafi-oriented activities by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia following the oil boom (Ibrahim, 2025). During this period, Salafiyyah became increasingly connected to other parts of the Muslim world through heavily funded missionary and philanthropic initiatives (Arikewuyo, 2025). Second, the 1970s witnessed the return of the first batch of Yoruba students from Saudi universities, including the Islamic University of Madinah and Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. These returnees sought to practice and propagate what they had learned abroad (Interview with Sheikh Ibrahim Raji (2021). Third, this decade also marked the earliest documented references to Salafiyyah and the initial negative reactions from traditional scholars in Yoruba land. Al-Ilori referred to the trend in 1978 and responded to issues that later became central themes in Salafi discourse, particularly *tawassul* and *istighathah*, understood as seeking intercession or assistance through saints, as well as aspects of mystical practices (Mustapha & Bunza, 2014). He described the adherents of Salafiyyah as beneficiaries of institutions such as the Muslim World League, which served as channels for Saudi outreach to the Muslim world.

At this early stage, Salafiyyah was practised largely on an individual and discreet basis due to the dominance and popularity of Sufism. Most adherents were youths who lacked the confidence to challenge the authority of established scholars. Consequently, many of the early Saudi-trained scholars later aligned with traditional Sufi scholarship, with only a few enduring the social stigma associated with Salafi identity (Interview with Sheikh Ibrahim Raji, August 2021). In the 1980s, awareness of Salafiyyah increased as more Yoruba students returned from Saudi universities. However, this period was characterised by significant overlap between Salafiyyah and the Muslim Brotherhood. Many Saudi-trained graduates at the time were influenced by both Salafi theology and Ikhwan methodology. This overlap persisted until the early twenty-first century, when Salafi literature critiquing Muslim Brotherhood ideology began to circulate widely in the region. Consequently, during the 1980s, both Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood advocates operated under the broader identity of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah*, united by a shared mission to revive the methodology of the Prophet and his Companions in a society marked by syncretic religious practices (Shehu, 2023).

Throughout the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century, Salafiyyah continued to operate under the *Ahl al-Sunnah* identity without a clear distinction from the Muslim Brotherhood. The differentiation between the two orientations became more pronounced only in the early twenty-first century, when doctrinal and methodological disagreements intensified in Southwestern Nigeria. Presently, Salafiyyah movements have become among the most influential Islamic groups in the region, with substantial control over mosques and madrasahs, a growing number of scholars and preachers, large followings, and extensive engagement through radio, television, and other media platforms.

c) Factions of Salafiyyah Groups in South Western Nigeria

It has been noted earlier that a prominent feature of contemporary Salafiyyah is the emergence of division and contention among its adherents, particularly over how the contents of classical Salafi works of the third and fourth

centuries should be applied to present realities. The inability to manage differences in interpretation and methodology has often led to the formation of irreconcilable factions within Salafiyyah. The Salafiyyah trend in Southwestern Nigeria is not exempt from this phenomenon. In the South Western geopolitical region of Nigeria, adherents of Salafiyyah can broadly be classified into four factions: the Dakātirah, the Madākhilah, the Jabatiyyah, and the Mutawassitūn, or intermediary faction. These factions represent the orientations of leading Salafi scholars, their followers, and their sympathizers in the region (Arikewuyo, 2021).

The Dakātirah faction represents a Salafi trend, largely associated with scholars holding doctoral degrees in Arabic and Islamic studies (Malik, 2022). They are referred to as Dakātirah due to the academic standing of their leading figures. A defining characteristic of this group is their relative tolerance toward other Muslims. They maintain cordial, peaceful relationships with Muslim Brotherhood-oriented organizations in the region, adopt a lenient stance toward controversial religious issues, and continue to show respect for their traditional teachers despite ideological differences. They rarely employ hostile or abusive language against their opponents or other Muslim organizations. This disposition has earned them the description of being moderate within the Salafi spectrum.

In contrast, the Madākhilah faction derives its orientation from the Saudi scholar Rabī' ibn Hādī al Madkhalī, who is widely known for his strict approach toward what he considers deviations within Salafiyyah. This faction is largely composed of Salafi youths and local tutors in the region. Its adherents are characterized by a strong tendency to discredit non-Salafi scholars, both locally and internationally. They often discourage cooperation with non-Salafis in religious or communal activities, openly criticise Muslim organisations, and dismiss their contributions to the development of Islam. The faction insists on exclusive adherence to what it defines as authentic Salafi methodology and exhibits rigidity in controversial matters, often rejecting scholarly verdicts issued by non-Salafi scholars. Members of this faction describe the Dakātirah as Salafis who compromise and warn their followers against seeking knowledge from scholars outside their approved circle (Arikewuyo, 2019).

The Jabatiyyah faction is led by Shaykh Muhammad Ali Jabata of Ilorin and is distinguished by an extreme posture of excommunication. The followers of this faction declare most Muslims, regardless of their ideological affiliation, as unbelievers, except for a small group aligned with their leader. Although its origin is traced to Ilorin, the influence of Shaykh Muhammad Ali Jabata has extended into parts of Southwestern Nigeria (Olanrewaju & Gambari, 2023). This orientation is rooted in an expansive interpretation of religious innovation, whereby virtually any perceived error, regardless of its magnitude, is considered sufficient to expel a person from Islam. Consequently, acts such as eating with a spoon, using prayer beads, kneeling to greet elders in accordance with Yoruba culture, participating in elections, standing to receive visitors, celebrating the Mawlid al Nabiyy, or belonging to a Muslim organization are all considered acts of disbelief by this faction. Salafi scholars both within and outside Nigeria have strongly condemned this approach and have classified the Jabatiyyah as Takfiri in both ideology and methodology.

The fourth faction, generally described as the intermediary group or Mutawassitūn, occupies a middle position between the previously mentioned factions. While they share the general Salafi suspicion toward non-Salafi groups and often oppose collaboration with Muslim Brotherhood-oriented organizations, they differ from the Madākhilah in their treatment of fellow Salafis. They do not declare the Dakātirah faction heretical but rather regard them as Salafi scholars who have erred in judgment. Similarly, the Dakātirah, Madākhilah, and Mutawassitūn do not excommunicate one another, despite mutual accusations. The Dakātirah tend to view the others as extremist Salafis, while the Madākhilah and some intermediary figures perceive the Dakātirah as overly compromising (Interviews, Arikewuyo, Ibrahim, and Abdur Razak, March 2021).

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the various Salafiyyah factions in South Western Nigeria draw upon the same primary textual sources for their religious arguments. The major factors responsible for factionalization are differences in attitudes toward non-Salafis, modes of engagement with Muslim Brotherhood-oriented groups, and divergent approaches to resolving controversial religious issues.

3.2. Discussion

a) The Activities and Contributions Of *Salafiyyah* in South-Western Nigeria

Da'wah Activity

The word *Da'wah* is from Arabic and originates from *da'ā*, which lexically means, among others, to call, invite, write, advocate, beseech, and supplicate (Ibn Manzūr, n.d.). These derivatives appear in different lexical and morphological patterns in no fewer than 187 verses of the Qur'an (Al-Ghazali, 2012). Technically, it is used to present Islam as a religion, or any effort at spreading Islam through missionary activities. The latter connotation represents the most common and conventional usage of the term *Da'wah*. The Holy Qur'an supports this understanding:

ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them in the best manner. Truly, your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, and He knows best those who are rightly guided” (Qur’an 16:125).

وَلَتَكُن مِّنكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“Let there arise from among you a group inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. And it is they who are the successful” (Qur’an 3:104).

In the above verses, Allah enjoins the Prophet and, by extension, all believers to shoulder the responsibility of Da’wah, strictly adhering to its ethics and bearing in mind that the task does not involve coercing people into Islam or hastily concluding that some are rightly guided while others have gone astray. Wisdom, fair preaching, and engaging most courteously remain the primary instruments of Da’wah.

Da’wah constitutes a major activity of Salafiyyah worldwide and in Southwestern Nigeria in particular. The movement employs various Da’wah methodologies to spread the message of Islam. The most prominent Da’wah activity of Salafiyyah is the *Halāqāt al ‘Ilmiyyah*, meaning knowledge-based scholarly sittings. Among Salafiyyah adherents, the term *Halqah* is widely used to describe regular gatherings of students and scholars held in mosques at specified times to study particular texts in various Islamic disciplines. These gatherings may take place on Sundays, Tuesdays, Fridays, and other days, depending on local arrangements. The objective of such gatherings is to enhance participants’ level of Islamic knowledge. Youth scholars largely attend some Halāqāt, and Arabic is often used as the medium of instruction in some of them (Interview, Ibrahim Abdul Rauf, 2021). These gatherings serve as the primary point of interaction among Salafiyyah adherents residing within a given locality under the guidance of a Salafi scholar.

In addition, another notable feature of Salafiyyah activities in the region and globally is the unprecedented inclination among children and youths toward memorising the Qur’an. This is achieved through the establishment of madāris and the integration of Qur’an memorisation into the curricula of schools founded by Salafiyyah advocates in towns such as Oshogbo, Ede, Ikirun, and Ile Ife (Alexander, 2016). It has been established that one of the hallmarks of the Islamic awakening that gained momentum in the 1970s was the spread of Qur’an memorisation. The Salafiyyah movement in the region has been at the forefront of sustaining this awakening in Southwestern Nigeria. Consequently, the current prevalence of Qur’an memorisation among children and youths in the region cannot be divorced from the influence and activities of Salafiyyah revivalist scholars.

Moreover, part of Salafiyyah’s activities in the geopolitical region involves the acquisition and transmission of knowledge to both the present and younger generations. Ibrahim identifies three categories of knowledge:

- 1) Acquisition of knowledge: which is the duty of every Muslim, particularly religious knowledge that enables proper worship of the Creator, as well as beneficial worldly knowledge that facilitates lawful livelihood and discourages dependence on others;
- 2) Practice, which entails applying acquired knowledge, since knowledge without practice is considered ineffective. The Qur’anic verse supports this position:

أَتَأْمُرُونَ النَّاسَ بِالْبِرِّ وَتَنْسَوْنَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

“Do you enjoin righteousness upon people while you forget yourselves, even though you recite the Scripture? Do you not reason?” (Qur’an 2:44).

- 3) Dissemination of knowledge to younger generations, which is achieved through the establishment of schools and madāris (Interview, Ibrahim Abdul Rauf, 2021).

The adherents of contemporary Salafiyyah in Osun State have criticised traditional madāris for their perceived inability to produce scholars sufficiently equipped to address modern Da’wah challenges. While acknowledging the role of traditional madāris in promoting Arabic literacy, they argue that some have become associated with spiritualism and herbal practices under the guise of scholarship. Furthermore, the challenge of integrating Western

education with Islamic studies remains unresolved in many traditional madāris, as several hold that such integration is unworkable.

b) Challenges Of Salafiyyah Movements In Osun State:

Challenges from Sufi Brotherhoods

Sufism, otherwise known as Islamic mysticism, remains a subject of intense controversy among Muslim scholars. Etymologically, the term's origin has generated divergent opinions among scholars. Oxtoby, W. G. (1996), in his work *World Religions*, states that the term *taṣawwuf* is derived from the Arabic word *ṣūf*, meaning wool. In emulation of Jesus, who is portrayed in Islamic hagiography as a model of ascetic piety, early Sufis wore coarse woollen garments over their bare skin as a symbol of ascetic poverty.

Ibn Taymiyyah, however, attempted to harmonise the various views on the origin of the term. According to him, one school traces it to *Ahl al Ṣuffah*, a group of poor but devout companions who lived in a designated section of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah and devoted themselves to worship. Another view traces it to *ṣūf* (wool), which was the common attire of early ascetics, while yet another opinion holds that it is derived from *ṣafā'* (purity). Ibn Taymiyyah maintained that none of these etymologies fundamentally contradicts the historical development of ascetic practices in Islam. Al Ilori also reported that some Orientalists suggested a Latin origin from *Sophia*, meaning wisdom, although Muslim scholars generally reject this view.

The polemics surrounding Sufism are largely provoked by certain doctrines and practices associated with some Sufi orders. These include *al fanā'* (annihilation of the self), *al maḥabbah* (mystical love), *al istighāthah* (seeking spiritual assistance from saints), *waḥdat al wujūd* (unity of existence or pantheism), and *al ḥulūl* (incarnation) (Cheifetz, 2023). Shittu further observed that some Sufis claim access to esoteric knowledge (*al bāṭiniyyah*), which is exclusively reserved for Allah (Asghari, 2024). Another controversial belief attributed to some Sufi masters, such as Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, is the possession of supernatural power to benefit or harm human beings. Closely related to this is *khalwah*, a Sufi practice of spiritual seclusion undertaken for forty days, four months, or even one year, during which the devotee withdraws from family, social, and economic life, and sometimes congregational prayers, to attain closeness to Allah through dhikr and supplication. As a result, Muslim scholars are polarised into three schools regarding the legal status of *taṣawwuf*: those who wholly embrace it as the primary means of spiritual upliftment, those who completely reject it, and those who adopt an intermediary position (Okumus, 2025). The Salafiyyah movement largely aligns with the school that strongly criticises Sufi practices, especially those perceived as innovations or doctrinal deviations.

In South Western Nigeria, Sufi brotherhoods are predominantly classified into two major orders, namely the Tijāniyyah and the Qādiriyyah, although there exist smaller offshoots (Sanusi, 2023). The Tijāniyyah order is associated with Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and Shaykh Ibrahim Niyass, while the Qādiriyyah order traces its origin to Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani. Prior to the emergence of Salafiyyah movements, there was little recorded polemic among traditional Muslims over the legitimacy of Sufi orders, many of whom adhered to Sufi methodology (Al Ilori, 1978). The Islamic awakening, which emphasised a return to the pristine Islam of the early generations, exposed what Salafiyyah scholars regarded as doctrinal errors and un-Islamic practices within Sufi orders. In this regard, the role of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria cannot be overstated, as findings indicate that early criticisms of Sufism in the region were pioneered within MSSN circles (Interview: Ustaz Ridwan and Muhammadu Jamiu, September 2021).

Among the practices of the Tijāniyyah order that attracted strong Salafiyyah criticism are the prioritisation of *Ṣalāt al Fātiḥ* over the Qur'an and the prophetic *Ṣalāt al Ibrāhimiyyah*, the spreading of white cloth during congregational supplications (*waṣīfah*), particularly between Maghrib and Ishā' prayers with the belief that the Prophet descends upon it, polygamy beyond four wives by some Tijāniyyah leaders, claims of esoteric knowledge, the elevation of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and Shaykh Ibrahim Niyass above the Companions, and, in rare instances, above the Prophet Muhammad himself. Other contested practices include veneration of graves and seeking assistance from deceased saints (Mustapha & Solagberu, 2015).

The Qādiriyyah order shares some of these practices but is particularly noted for the use of drums and ritual dancing during supplications, especially on Fridays between Asr and Maghrib prayers. The sustained criticism of these practices by Salafiyyah scholars has led to the withdrawal of many adherents from Sufi orders, with a significant proportion of Salafiyyah members in the region being former Sufis (Interview: Ibrahim Abdur Rauf and Ustaz Ridwan, September 2021).

Consequently, persistent criticism and counter-criticism between Sufi brotherhoods and Salafiyyah movements constitute one of the major challenges faced by Salafiyyah in Osun State, often propagated through sermons, mass media, and social media platforms.

c) Challenges from Muslim Brotherhood-Oriented and Other Islamic Organisations

Another significant challenge confronting Salafiyyah movements in Osun State emanates from Muslim Brotherhood-oriented organisations and other Islamic bodies. This tension largely revolves around disagreements on the legitimacy and role of Muslim organisations. Some Salafiyyah factions emphasise the condemnation of organised Islamic movements, often disregarding their historical contributions, thereby earning the label *Lā Jamā'ah* (anti-organisation) (Sheikh, 2021). Muslim Brotherhood-oriented organisations include The Muslim Congress, Jamā'at Ta'awunil Muslimeen, Organisation of Tadamunul Muslimeen, and The Islamic Movement, alongside other bodies such as Ansar Ud Deen Society, Muslim Students Society of Nigeria, Federation of Muslim Women Associations of Nigeria, Hizbullah, Nasirullahi Fathi Society, and various Aşalātu groups in South Western Nigeria (Balogun, 2019).

Some Salafiyyah groups interpret the Prophetic narration on the division of the Ummah into seventy-three sects as including Muslim organisations among the condemned seventy-two. However, another bloc within Salafiyyah argues that organisational affiliation itself is not problematic, but rather the ideology and creed upheld by such organisations. Nevertheless, the *Lā Jamā'ah* faction maintains that no existing organisation meets Salafiyyah standards, leading to sustained hostility toward them and labelling their members as *Elegbe* (partisan elements). Muslim organisations, in turn, have responded through lectures, publications, and digital media, arguing that organisational platforms are indispensable in a pluralistic society like Nigeria for defending Muslim rights and countering Christian dominance. They also reject being classified as heretical sects (Interview: Imam Habeebullah and Ibrahim Abdur Rauf, September 2021).

Historically, the formation of Muslim organisations in Nigeria dates back to the nineteenth century, when Muslim children were vulnerable to Christian conversion through Western missionary education (Okpalike & Nwadiolor, 2015). In response, Muslims established organisations to provide integrated Islamic and Western education. Notably, the Salafiyyah movement itself functions as an organised group within this broader landscape. Kilani (2008, p. 62) observed that the twentieth century witnessed a surge in Muslim consciousness, expressed through pressure-group organisations aimed at integrating Western and Islamic education. These organisations have contributed significantly to education, workforce development, economic empowerment, preservation of Islamic culture, and media engagement. Despite ideological differences among them, there is no textual evidence in the Qur'an or Sunnah declaring the formation of Muslim organisations unlawful.

d) Challenge of Overzealous Youths

Another major challenge confronting Salafiyyah movements in Osun State is their inability to manage the excesses of overzealous youths adequately. Research indicates that some Salafiyyah students interpret classical Salafi texts rigidly, believing that collaboration with non-Salafis is impermissible except in cases of necessity (Interview: Raji Ibrahim, 2021). This literalism has led some to excommunicate fellow Salafis who adopt a more cooperative approach.

Senior Salafiyyah scholars, drawing from experience and broader scholarship, often engage with other Muslims to advance shared Islamic goals. Their pragmatic stance has earned them the label "*Dakātirah*" from younger, hardline adherents. This divide has led to the emergence of what may be described as open-minded and partisan Salafiyyah factions, with the latter largely composed of youthful, inexperienced adherents.

e) Challenge of Calumny

Salafiyyah movements also face challenges of calumny and misrepresentation from some Muslim organisations, individuals, and traditional scholars. Among such allegations is the claim that Salafis neglect filial obligations, including the false assertion that they replace maternal breast milk with cow milk as a form of rejection of parental authority. Such accusations contradict Islamic teachings, as clearly stated in the Qur'an:

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهْنًا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفِصَالُهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنِ اشْكُرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَيَّ الْمَصِيرُ
وَإِنْ جَاهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا وَصَاحِبُهُمَا فِي الدُّنْيَا مَعْرُوفًا

“And we have enjoined upon man care for his parents. His mother carried him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning was in two years. Give thanks to your parents and to Me. To Me is the final return. However, if they strive to make you associate with Me that of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but accompany them in this world with kindness” (Qur'an 31:14 15).

Another allegation is what is termed “robbery *‘aqd al nikāh*,” referring to marriages conducted without proper parental consent. Research indicates that such practices, which exploit poverty and naivety, violate Islamic marital conditions and are not endorsed by Salafiyyah scholarship (Interview: Habeebullah Abdur Rahman).

Salafiyyah adherents are also sometimes accused of extremism and linked to Boko Haram due to misconceptions surrounding the term jihad. This association is unfounded, as Salafiyyah scholars consistently repudiate Boko Haram’s ideology and methods. Furthermore, Salafiyyah’s rejection of photography except in cases of necessity, such as for official documentation, is often misunderstood. This stance is based on Prophetic traditions such as: “Indeed, the angels do not enter a house in which there are pictures or statues” (Al Bukhari, 3226; Muslim, 2106). Another narration states: “The people who will receive the harshest punishment on the Day of Resurrection are the image makers” (Al Bukhari, 72:834).

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

This study has important theoretical and practical implications for the understanding of Islamic reform movements in contemporary West Africa. Theoretically, it clarifies how Salafiyyah in South-Western Nigeria operates not merely as a theological orientation but as a structured socio-religious movement with educational, organisational, and media dimensions. It demonstrates that intra-Muslim tensions in the region are shaped more by methodological and organisational disagreements than by differences in primary textual sources. Practically, the findings suggest the need for structured scholarly engagement, conflict-sensitive da’wah approaches, and leadership strategies capable of managing factional diversity within the Salafiyyah spectrum. The study also implies that sustainable religious reform in pluralistic societies requires dialogue, institutional accountability, and responsible youth mentorship to prevent ideological rigidity and fragmentation.

4.1 Research Contributions

This research contributes to scholarship in Islamic studies, religious sociology, and African studies by providing an empirically grounded analysis of the Salafiyyah movement in South-Western Nigeria. It fills a documented gap in academic literature by systematically examining the movement’s historical development, factional dynamics, activities, and challenges using both field interviews and documentary sources. The study further provides a contextualised framework for analysing Salafiyyah movements beyond global generalisations that often associate them with extremism. By situating the movement within Nigeria’s socio-religious landscape, the research provides a reliable reference for future studies of Islamic reform, religious pluralism, and Muslim organisational development in sub-Saharan Africa.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.1 Research Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was geographically restricted to South-Western Nigeria, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions of the country, where Salafiyyah movements may exhibit different historical trajectories and organisational dynamics. Second, the study relied largely on qualitative data derived from interviews, documentary sources, and field observations. While triangulation was used to enhance credibility, participants’ responses may reflect personal interpretations, factional loyalties, or selective historical recollections. Third, access to certain internal records of Salafiyyah factions and other Islamic organisations was limited, which constrained the depth of institutional analysis. Finally, the dynamic and evolving nature of religious movements means that ideological positions, alliances, and tensions may continue to shift beyond the time frame of this research.

5.1 Recommendation for Future Research Direction

Future research may expand the scope by conducting comparative studies across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria to examine regional variations in Salafiyyah ideology, organisation, and engagement with society. Quantitative approaches could also be employed to measure the demographic composition, educational impact, and social influence of Salafiyyah adherents. Additionally, further studies may explore gender dynamics within Salafiyyah movements, the role of digital media in shaping contemporary da’wah strategies, and longitudinal analyses of youth participation and factional transformation. Such research would deepen scholarly understanding of Islamic reform

movements in Nigeria and contribute to broader discussions on religion, social change, and inter-group relations in pluralistic societies.

6. CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is that Salafiyyah ideology and activities, which centre on a return to pristine Islam, remain indispensable to contemporary Muslim life. Achieving this objective requires a proper understanding of the creed and methodology of the first three generations of Muslims, as well as an appreciation of how these early Muslims perfected their religion through strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The Prophet Muhammad laid down both the fundamentals and practical applications of Islam for his companions. He demonstrated the harmony between intention and action, knowledge and practice. The Salaf adhered firmly to these principles. They exemplified patience and perseverance, possessed a deeper understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith than later generations, worshipped Allah as He ought to be worshipped, and earned the pleasure of Allah and His Messenger.

Salafiyyah ideology and activities essentially revolve around the pursuit of knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith, their proper understanding, and their application in accordance with the understanding and practice of the Prophet, his companions, and the early generations of Muslims, to attain success in this world and the Hereafter. Scholars have presented the term Salafiyyah in two contrasting usages. On the one hand, it denotes renewal and reform through the reassessment of Islam's foundational sources. On the other hand, it has been conflated with the Western usage of the term "fundamentalism" or *Usuliyyah*, derived from the Arabic root *usul*, meaning fundamentals. While the term itself is linguistically sound, its Western application has often been negative and misleading. Consequently, the use of labels such as fundamentalism, extremism, activism, Salafism, or Jihadism with violent connotations represents a misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, and a distortion of their foundations and adherents. Finally, the study of Salafiyyah activities enhances public awareness within the study area. It affirms that Salafiyyah ideology and activities are not separate from Islam but are an integral part of it. They remain fundamental to fulfilling the mission of the Prophet Muhammad and to promoting the moral, spiritual, and social well-being of society.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Suberu Ibrahim: Conceptualization and Design, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft; Adeoye Adeola Waheed: Writing - Review & Editing, Performed data collection and Analysis, Interpretation of the results.

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During the preparation of this manuscript, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools were used solely to assist with language refinement, grammatical editing, and sentence clarity. The use of these tools was limited to enhancing the readability and coherence of the text without altering the substantive content, research findings, interpretation, or scholarly arguments presented in this study. All conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions were conducted independently by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work and confirm that all sources cited have been appropriately acknowledged. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the [IJRIS GenAI Tool Usage Policy](#), with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work."

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research, analysis, or interpretation of the findings presented in this study.

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