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Negotiating Faith and Reason: Intellectual Discourses and Emotional Expressions on the Celebration of the Prophet's Birthday-Mawlūd-among Yoruba Muslim Scholars in Nigeria

Ahmad Tijani Surajudeen¹

Abstract

The observance of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, known as "Mawlūd," has long been a subject of ambivalent interpretation among Muslims, oscillating between intellectual discourse and emotional expression. This research examines how Yoruba Muslim scholars in Nigeria navigate this ambiguity between religion and reason in their discussions on the relevance and justification of observing Mawlūd. Through textual analysis of sermons, scholarly writings, oral traditions, and insights from ethnographic studies of community practices, this study identifies two primary approaches among Yoruba Muslim scholars in Nigeria. One approach involves rational critiques grounded in adherence to the authority of the Qur'ān and Sunnah, aiming to reject innovations. The other adopts a nurturing stance, emphasizing the importance of expressing love for Prophet Muhammad through the communal practice of Mawlūd as a gesture of unity. The findings demonstrate that the relevance and justification of observing Prophet Muhammad's birthday among Nigerian Muslims cannot be understood solely as a theological debate but must be contextualized within the broader cultural and historical experiences of Yoruba Muslims.

Keywords: *Mawlūd, Yoruba Muslim Scholars, Faith and Reason, Intellectual Discourse, Emotional Expression.*

¹ Lecturer, Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, Sokoto State University (SSU), Sokoto, Nigeria

sirajudeenolojel@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6143-1355>

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Introduction

Yorubaland, located in southwestern Nigeria, encompasses present-day Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, and parts of Kwara and Kogi States. Islam reached Yorubaland as early as the 14th century through trans-Saharan trade and was further reinforced by interactions with Muslim traders from the Hausa, Nupe, and Mali empires. The spread of the Sokoto Jihad movement in the 19th century also played a significant role in strengthening Islam in the region. The emergence of prominent Yoruba Islamic scholars, such as Sheikh Alimi of Ilorin and Sheikh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilory of Agege, marked a profound intellectual and spiritual transformation. This period saw the establishment of Islamic schools, the production of scholarly works, and the promotion of Arabic literacy and da'wah activities.

Indeed, this not only highlights the extensive and deeply rooted permeation of Islam in Yoruba culture but also demonstrates how Islamic scholarship was fused with and adapted to Yoruba traditions, thereby ensuring the continued spread of Islam in Yorubaland. The feast commemorating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, known as Mawlūd al-Nabī, is among the most hotly debated Islamic practices. Some Islamic scholars consider it a legitimate expression of respect and devotion to the Holy Prophet, while others view the feast as an innovation (bid'ah) with no foundation in either the Qur'ān or Sunnah.^{1,2} This debate has sparked numerous intellectual and theological discussions among Muslims worldwide, with Africa—particularly Nigeria—being no exception. However, within Yorubaland, where there has been a rich interaction between Islam and local culture, as well as between Islam and Christianity, the discourse on Mawlūd extends beyond theological controversy to encompass faith, reason, and emotion.³

This study addresses the persistent dichotomous perspective that Mawlūd is either intellectually irrational or emotionally indispensable. While various studies have examined the broader debates between Islamic reformists and Sufis in West Africa, few have specifically investigated how Yoruba Muslims navigate both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of Mawlūd. There is a notable gap in recent research on Mawlūd practices among Yoruba Muslims. Although scholars such as Clarke⁴ and Loimeier⁵ have explored aspects of Yoruba religious pluralism and reformist discourses in West Africa, few have analyzed how Yoruba Muslims position Mawlūd from intellectual or emotional

¹ Brown, Jonathan A. C. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014.

² al-Suyūfī, Jalāl al-Dīn. 2001. *Husn al-Maqṣid fī 'Amal al-Mawlid*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.

³ J. D. Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016)

⁴ Clarke, Peter B, *West Africa and Islam: A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982)

⁵ Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

perspectives^{1,2}. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how Yoruba Muslims strategically engage emotions in discussions about Mawlūd from an intellectual standpoint. The need for this research is particularly urgent given the potential for intra-Muslim polarization arising from ongoing sectarian disputes.

This study is justified because Mawlūd is more than a devotional practice in Islam; it also serves as a space where cultural identities are formed and where Islam is debated among theologians and scholars in West Africa. Investigating the perspectives of Yoruba Muslim scholars is essential for a deeper understanding of how reason and emotion mutually shape each other within Islam in West Africa. The importance of this study is underscored by the role that religious discourse plays in constructing cultural identity among Muslims in Nigeria, particularly through inter-religious relations. The controversy surrounding Mawlūd provides an opportunity to explore the mechanisms by which Yoruba Muslim scholars negotiate their definitions of orthodoxy through reason and their interpretations of devotional practices through emotion in Islam in West Africa.³

The originality of this research lies in its approach to analyzing intellectual discourse alongside emotional expression. While previous studies have primarily focused on examining the theological orthodoxy of Islam or the religious practices of the masses, this study aims to address both perspectives. This dual focus enables it to demonstrate how Yoruba Muslim scholars integrate their religious beliefs with intellectual inquiry.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

This is illustrated in the conceptual framework, where Yoruba Muslim scholars' reasoning processes are combined with their emotional expressions to interpret their stance on the Mawlūd celebration as Muslim scholars. These two processes in the scholars' position on the Mawlūd celebration are not contradictory; rather, their integration forms the final perspective on the matter. The opinions of classical Muslim scholars, both in support of and in opposition to the Mawlūd celebration, will be clearly presented, followed by an analysis of the common ground between the two viewpoints.

Intellectual Reasoning in Islamic Thought

This approach involves interpreting texts, applying the principles of jurisprudence, and engaging in theological discourse to establish the validity of Mawlid. Intellectual reasoning underpins the method used by scholars who draw upon Quranic texts, the traditions of the Prophet (hadith), and debates within traditional jurisprudential fields to articulate their

¹ Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*.

² Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*.

³ Afeez Olosio. "Faith and Identity in Contemporary Yoruba Islam." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 49, no. 2 (2019): 139–61. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12340100>.

position. This reasoning tends to follow a rationalist approach, emphasizing orthodoxy, authenticity, and the prevention of religious innovation (*bid'ah*).

The role of intellectual reasoning in Islamic discourse has been crucial in debates concerning orthodoxy, legitimacy, and innovation. Ibn Taymiyyah, a classical Islamic scholar, opposed the practice of Mawlid, arguing that it lacks a textual basis in the Quran and Sunnah and should therefore be considered an unholy innovation (*bid'ah*)¹. Conversely, scholars like Suyuti² have maintained that Mawlid is a legitimate act of sincere devotion intended to honor the Prophet and promote communal solidarity. These debates reflect the rich tradition of intellectual reasoning within Islam.

Within the West African context, groups such as Izala in Nigeria have emphasized intellectualism and literalism in their rejection of the Mawlid ritual. However, Yoruba Muslims seem to navigate a delicate balance in their intellectual engagement with their faith, combining scriptural reasoning with their cultural traditions of practice. This intellectual exercise among Yoruba Muslims is inherently political and situates them within the broader movements of revival and reform in global Islam.³

Emotions in Islamic Piety

Islamic devotion often includes emotional expressions that convey the deep affection and reverence for Prophet Muhammad. These expressions encompass joy, love, and a sense of brotherhood within the Muslim community, demonstrated through poetry recitation, music, prayer sessions, and collective celebrations during Mawlid. Many scholars view these practices as reinforcing spiritual connection to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and as instruments for fostering unity within the Muslim community.

The framework acknowledges that intellectual reasoning and emotions are constantly in negotiation. While some scholars adopt a staunchly rationalist approach, others integrate intellectual reasoning with emotions, resulting in a broad spectrum of perspectives. This spectrum is bidirectional: intellectual reasoning can temper overly emotional practices, while strong emotional commitment can moderate rigid rationalist criticism.

For Muslims, the expression of emotion has always been a vital aspect of spiritual practice, particularly within Sufi traditions, where love and devotion to Prophet Muhammad hold great significance.⁴ Mawlid celebrations exemplify this, as they

¹ Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā' al-Širāt al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001)

² Suyūṭī, Ḥusn al-Maḥṣid.

³ Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016)

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

emphasize emotion, poetry, singing (Qasīda), and remembrance, which are central to both spiritual attachment and social cohesion within the community.¹ In Yoruba land, these practices are enriched by indigenous music and performance, giving the Mawlid a distinctive cultural dimension. According to researchers, such emotional expressions serve as a crucial counterbalance to intellectual critiques, providing Muslims with a platform to experience devotion in an embodied form rather than solely through intellectual engagement.²

Religious Authority and Communal Identity

The process by which intellectual reasoning and emotional expression correlate with the formation of religious authority has direct implications here. Max Weber's³ theory effectively explains how religious authority is attained by intellectual or religious leaders through charisma, which may be derived from texts, intellectual reasoning, emotional expression, or a combination of these factors⁴. Leaders who possess a strong ability to interpret either or both aspects tend to hold greater authority within Yoruba Islamic culture. Additionally, group or communal identity is reinforced by the Mawlūd celebration ritual, which publicly affirms the values of religion and history. For the Yoruba population at large, the Mawlūd celebration signifies much more than religious observance; it also encompasses cultural aspects.

These arrows point toward religious authority and social identity through both rational argumentation and emotional expression, highlighting the outcomes of this dynamic. Religious authority is articulated when scholars legitimize themselves either through doctrinal rigor or emotional appeals to the community. Similarly, social identity is expressed when Mawlud becomes a focal point of collective symbolic statements, encompassing both rational beliefs and emotional connections. Thus, this discourse demonstrates that the conversation about Mawlud among Yoruba Muslim scholars is not merely a formulation of an orthodoxy-versus-popular religiosity dichotomy. Instead, it is this rational-emotional dialectic that shapes the dynamic of articulating religiosity, authority, and social identity.

As noted in existing literature, Mawlūd is situated neither at the extremes of orthodoxy and innovation nor in opposition to them, but rather at the intersection where reason and emotion converge. While previous scholarship has shed light on Islamic

¹ Stefan Reichmuth, "Islam and the Yoruba: Encounters in the 19th and 20th Centuries." *Islamic Studies* 35, no. 1 (1996): 49–67.

² Abdulrazzak El-Zein, *Islamic Modernities: Explorations in Religion and Modernity*. London: Saqi Books, (2009).

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*.

reformist movements and Yoruba religious pluralism, there has been limited attention to how Yoruba Muslim scholars navigate both rationalist and affective dimensions in discourses surrounding Mawlūd. This research aims to contextualize the Yoruba example of integrating reasoning and emotional engagement within Islam.

Views of Classical Muslim Scholars on Mawlūd

Several traditional Islamic scholars have defended the permissibility and desirability of celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday. They base their reasoning on the practice of Mawlūd as a demonstration of "maḥabbah" (love) and "ta'zīm" (honor) directed toward the Prophet, provided the practice does not involve any unlawful innovations. Al-Suyūṭī, a renowned Islamic scholar of the 16th century CE, authored the book *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid Fī 'Amal al-Mawlid*, in which he stated, "It is lawful to celebrate the Prophet's Birthday, provided it is accompanied by the chanting of the Quran, poetry, and acts of charity." However, the book's background explains that the practice of Mawlūd is, in fact, a desirable innovation, known as a 'bid'ah ḥasanah,' wherein the celebration combines Quranic recitation, poetry praising the Prophet, and charitable deeds. The foundation of this practice lies in its Islamic objectives: to strengthen devotion and foster communal unity, as indicated by a Quranic verse cited in al-Suyūṭī's work¹.

Another renowned Islamic scholar and hadith expert, Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, wrote in the 14th century CE that "there is nothing wrong with the Mawlid if it does not involve prohibited practices." He explained that during the Mawlid, a person commemorates the Prophet in gratitude to Allah, acknowledging Allah's decision to send the Prophet to bless the people of the world². Another Islamic scholar, al-Shāmī, a Shafī'ee who later adopted the Maliki school, stated in the 16th century CE that "the Mawlid is a call for people to unite spiritually through the Prophet³."

On the contrary, some classical scholars were highly critical of Mawlūd, viewing it as an illegitimate innovation with no precedent in the Sunnah of the Prophet or the practices of his Companions. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), in "Iqtiḍā' al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaḳīm", outright condemned Mawlūd, noting that the salaf—the first three generations of Muslims—did not observe it, and that its introduction as an Islamic ritual contradicted the example set by the Prophet⁴. Although he acknowledged some sincere intentions behind Mawlūd practices, he concluded that "a person's true affection for the Prophet Muhammad consists in obedience to the Prophet's Sunnah and in preferring acts of obedience in compliance with the Prophet's commands over acts of affection and attachment performed

¹ Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid*.

² Aḥmad ibn 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1997)

³ al-Shāmī, *Subul al-Hudā wa-al-Rashād fī Sīrat Khayr al-'Ibād*. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1997).

⁴ Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtiḍā' al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaḳīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 2:619–620.

in opposition to the Prophet's orders”.¹ Similarly, Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336), in “al-Madkhal”, denounced the celebration of Mawlūd due to the “contamination of Mawlūd celebrations by excessive and meaningless elements, such as lavishness, prohibited mixing, and music,” which are often employed to justify prohibited practices “under the false pretext of piety²”. Fākihānī (d. 734/1333), a Mālikī jurist from North Africa, also issued a fatwa against Mawlūd, deeming it an illegitimate innovation. He asserted that Mawlūd has “no basis whatsoever in the Qur’an and the Sunnah” and that “it has the potential to cause impurity in Islamic ritual.”³

To summarize briefly, the diverging views reveal two major epistemic strategies. The pro-Mawlūd school adopted a more dynamic approach to innovation, recognizing the ritual as a *bid‘ah ḥasanah* (good innovation)—a commendable act that deepened religious commitment. In contrast, the anti-Mawlūd school took a more conservative stance toward the Prophet’s legacy, regarding all forms of innovation in ritual practices after the Prophet as forbidden. These classical debates provide the intellectual foundation for contemporary discussions among Yoruba Muslim scholars in Nigeria, where Mawlūd remains situated at the intersection of textual argumentation and devotional practice. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework: Negotiating Faith and Reason in Mawlid Discourses.

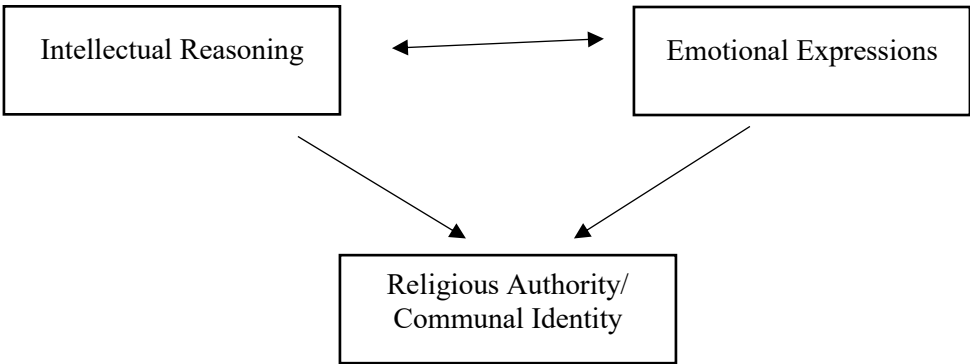


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Negotiating Faith and Reason in Mawlid Discourses)

Methodology

¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, Aḥmad. 2001. *Iqtiḍā’ al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah.

² Ibn al-Ḥājj, Aḥmad, *al-Madkhal*. (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1981)

³ al-Fākihānī, A. n.d. *Fatwa on Mawlūd*. Cited in Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative and interpretive, involving a close textual and discursive analysis of Yoruba Muslim scholars' discourses on Mawlūd. This research design is appropriate, as it specifically targets meaning-making, encompassing the ways in which reasoning and emotion are produced, legitimized, and contested within texts and discourses.^{1,2} The data may originate from sermons, written texts, and oral discourses, allowing for triangulation and enabling an exploration of how elite and popular discourses within the texts are constructed and contested.^{3,4} The data may consist of sermons delivered by and among religious scholars and imams, fatwas, written texts and pamphlet-form discourse, public statements, interview data, qasīda (praise poetry), and first-hand testimonies. These sources may be purposively selected to represent the discourse among the community. Gathering the data will involve documenting Mawlūd sermons and events with the subjects' consent, collecting relevant videos and media files, and sourcing research literature from libraries and online platforms. All verbal discourse will be translated into Yorùbá, Arabic, and English. The translations will then undergo bilingual validation.⁵ Paratexts such as title pages, prefaces, and publication contexts will also be captured to incorporate the perceived intentions of the authors.

The study employs a two-step coding method: thematic induction to identify themes such as scriptural evidence, refutations of bid'ah, love for the Prophet, and community solidarity,⁶ followed by deductive code assignment using categories including Intellectual Reasoning, Emotional Expression, and Religious Authority/Community Identity. Additionally, the study utilizes thematic analysis and partial critical discourse analysis. It also traces connections between Mawlūd discourse and classical works. Trustworthiness will be ensured through methodological, data, and analyst triangulation, reflexive memoing, and informal member checking.⁷ Thick description and exemplary quotes will enhance transferability.⁸ Ethical considerations—including approval, informed consent, anonymization, and culturally appropriate dissemination—will be prioritized. Challenges

¹ Fairclough, Norman, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995)

² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

³ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA: SAGE Publications, 2018)

⁴ David Silverman, *Qualitative Research*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, (CA: SAGE Publications, 2016)

⁵ Bogusia Temple and Alys Young. "Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas." *Qualitative Research* 4, no. 2 (2004): 161–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794104044430>.

⁶ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA: SAGE Publications, 2016).

⁷ Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

such as potential sampling bias and translation issues will be addressed through careful documentation and bilingual validation. The deliverables will include coded texts, thematic maps, illustrative quotes, and a comparative matrix of scholarly views, highlighting how Yoruba Mawlūd discourse serves as a space negotiated by reason and emotion to collectively build authority and group membership.

Results and Discussion of Findings

This section presents the results of the textual analyses, followed by detailed explanations in the subsequent paragraphs.

First, regarding intellectual reasoning in Islamic thought, the analysis of sermons and scholarly writings among Yoruba Muslim scholars reveals a consistent reliance on Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic traditions to justify positions on Mawlūd. Reformist scholars, influenced by the legacy of movements such as the Izala, frequently cite verses like Qur'an 5:3 ("This day I have perfected for you your religion...") to argue that the religion requires no additions. This mirrors the the classical arguments of Ibn Taymiyyah,¹ who considered Mawlūd an unnecessary innovation. This textual anchoring demonstrates that intellectual reasoning among reformists is framed as a safeguard of orthodoxy. In contrast, scholars sympathetic to Mawlūd cite hadiths about expressing joy on the Prophet's birthday or emphasize general verses urging gratitude to Allah (Qur'an 10:58). This approach reflects al-Suyūṭī's defense of Mawlūd as a *bid'ah ḥasanah*.² Within Yoruba contexts, such reasoning appears in pamphlets and public lectures where scholars argue that intellectual interpretation must serve the spiritual objectives of reinforcing devotion and communal unity. Thus, intellectual reasoning is not monolithic but shaped by hermeneutical orientation.

A striking finding is the blending of intellectual and cultural reasoning. Some Yoruba Muslim scholars, even while acknowledging reformist critiques, argue that Mawlūd serves as a tool for Islamic education, providing opportunities to narrate the Prophet's biography to younger generations. This pragmatic reasoning resembles Ibn Ḥajar's approach, which deemed Mawlūd acceptable if it involved permissible acts and avoided extravagance. Thus, intellectual reasoning transcends strict legality to embrace pedagogical and communal considerations. The discussion reveals that intellectual reasoning is often employed strategically to maintain authority. By invoking the Qur'ān and Sunnah, scholars establish themselves as custodians of authentic knowledge, thereby reinforcing Weberian notions of traditional authority.³ Reformist voices gain legitimacy by emphasizing orthodoxy, while pro-Mawlūd scholars gain credibility by linking textual

¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtiḍā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*.

² Suyūṭī, *Husn al-Maqṣid*, 52–55.

³ Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*.

interpretations to community well-being. This dual use of reasoning highlights how theology intersects with social positioning.

Another important finding is that intellectual reasoning is sometimes subordinated to broader communal concerns. For instance, even scholars who privately view Mawlūd as problematic often remain silent in public to avoid polarizing their communities. This indicates a pragmatic adaptation of reasoning to socio-political realities.¹ Such silences highlight how intellectual discourses are not purely doctrinal but are deeply embedded in contexts of communal harmony. Overall, intellectual reasoning among Yoruba Muslim scholars on Mawlūd oscillates between strict reformist orthodoxy and pragmatic interpretive flexibility. This reflects both the enduring influence of classical Islamic jurisprudence and the necessity of contextual adaptation in pluralistic societies. It underscores that intellectual reasoning, far from being an abstract exercise, functions as a tool for negotiating authenticity, authority, and cohesion in Yoruba Islam.

Second, regarding emotional expressions in Islamic devotion, data from sermons and oral narratives show that Mawlūd is often defended less by legal reasoning than by emotional expressions of devotion. Yoruba Muslim scholars frequently describe the event as a celebration of “love for the Prophet” (*maḥabbah al-nabī*). This echoes Schimmel’s (1985) observation that Islamic piety has historically emphasized affective bonds with the Prophet. Mawlūd thus emerges as an emotionally charged occasion where devotion is performed communally. Oral narratives, particularly poetry and *qasīda* recited during Mawlūd gatherings, demonstrate how emotion is embodied in artistic expression. These performances create an atmosphere of joy, solidarity, and reverence, strengthening spiritual attachment to the Prophet. In this regard, Yoruba cultural aesthetics of music and rhythm converge with Sufi traditions of praise poetry.² Emotional expressions thus extend Islamic devotion into the cultural lifeworld of Yoruba Muslims.

Interestingly, emotional arguments are also used defensively against reformist critiques. Some pro-Mawlūd scholars contend that prohibiting the expression of joy for the Prophet undermines the very essence of Islam as a religion of love and gratitude. They reference Qur’an 33:56 (“Indeed, Allah and His angels send blessings on the Prophet...”) as evidence that Muslims are commanded to engage in affective remembrance. This reflects al-Suyūṭī’s emphasis on Mawlūd as a legitimate form of rejoicing.³ The analysis also reveals that emotional expressions are deeply generational. Younger participants at Mawlūd events often describe feelings of connection to their heritage, while older attendees view it as a reaffirmation of lifelong devotion. This intergenerational transmission of affect reinforces communal identity, echoing El-Zein’s (2009) argument that emotions in religion serve as vehicles for cultural continuity. Emotional devotion, therefore, bridges personal

¹ Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*.

² Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion*.

³ Suyūṭī, Ḥusn al-Maḥsid.

piety and collective memory¹. However, reformist scholars' critique of emotional expressions as potentially misleading. They argue that emotional fervor can normalize innovations and overshadow critical reasoning. Sermons analyzed in this study often warn against being "carried away" by joy, reflecting Ibn al-Ḥājj's concerns about excess and distraction². This tension illustrates the dialectical relationship between reason and emotion in Yoruba Muslim discourses on Mawlūd. Overall, the findings show that emotional expressions are central to the persistence of Mawlūd in Yoruba land. While reformists seek to restrict emotional devotion, affective practices continue to sustain the celebration by grounding it in experiential faith. Emotional expressions not only reinforce piety but also serve as powerful tools for cultural cohesion and intergenerational solidarity. Reason: The revision corrects minor punctuation errors, such as adding a comma after

Third, regarding religious authority and communal identity, one of the most significant findings is that intellectual reasoning and emotional expression converge in the construction of religious authority. Reformist scholars establish authority by asserting fidelity to the Qur'ān and Sunnah, while pro-Mawlūd scholars gain legitimacy through their capacity to inspire emotional devotion and communal trust. This duality aligns with Weber's typology of authority, in which charisma and traditional knowledge coexist.³

In Yoruba contexts, Mawlūd has become a litmus test of scholarly authority. Leaders who support Mawlūd often attract large followings due to their alignment with popular devotion, while reformist leaders draw adherents seeking doctrinal purity. This division reflects earlier West African debates between Sufi-oriented scholars and reformist critics as literature contends.⁴ Authority, therefore, is not static but is negotiated through competing modes of reasoning and devotion.

Communal identity emerges as a crucial outcome of Mawlūd discourse. For many Yoruba Muslims, Mawlūd is not merely a ritual but an affirmation of cultural belonging. Attending and supporting Mawlūd celebrations signifies loyalty to a communal tradition that blends Islamic devotion with Yoruba cultural aesthetics as literature asserts.⁵ This identity function explains why Mawlūd endures despite ongoing intellectual opposition. Simultaneously, debates surrounding Mawlūd generate intra-Muslim fragmentation. Reformist groups that reject Mawlūd often position themselves as distinct from "mainstream" Yoruba Muslims, thereby creating boundaries of identity. This differentiation underscores Peel's observation that Yoruba Islam is shaped by pluralism

¹El-Zein, *Islamic Modernities*.

² Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal* (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1981), 2:2–6, 2:10–14.

³ Weber, *Economy and Society*.

⁴ Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*.

⁵ Stefan Reichmuth, "Islam and the Yoruba: Encounters in the 19th and 20th Centuries." *Islamic Studies* 35, no. 1(1996): 49–67.

and contestation. Thus, Mawlūd functions both as a unifying practice and as a marker of division.¹

The analyzed sermons reveal that authority is also shaped by socio-political realities. Scholars who publicly oppose Mawlūd but fail to provide alternative platforms for community gatherings risk marginalization. Conversely, pro-Mawlūd scholars strengthen their authority by aligning themselves with grassroots sentiments and communal festivities. This suggests that authority is relational and contingent upon maintaining resonance with community needs.² In sum, Mawlūd debates in Yoruba land illustrate how religious authority and communal identity are continuously renegotiated. Intellectual reasoning and emotional devotion are not competing but complementary sources of legitimacy. The endurance of Mawlūd demonstrates that Yoruba Muslim identity is constructed through a delicate balance of orthodoxy, affect, and communal solidarity.

Intellectual Harmonization of Classical Muslim Scholars' Opinions on Mawlūd

The celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Mawlūd) has historically been a contested issue in Islamic scholarship. Classical Muslim scholars expressed diverse opinions, ranging from strong rejection to qualified acceptance, reflecting differences in jurisprudential methodology, theological orientation, and socio-cultural contexts. Understanding these divergent views equips contemporary Muslims with the tools to engage in the debate constructively.

Prominent classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) argued that Mawlūd constitutes a religious innovation (*bid'ah*) with no precedent in the early generations of Islam. In his *"Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm"*, he cautioned that innovations, even if motivated by love for the Prophet, risk diverting believers from the authentic practices prescribed in the Qur'an and Sunnah.³ Similarly, Ibn al-Hājj (d. 1336), in *"al-Madkhal"*, critiqued the excesses associated with Mawlūd, such as extravagance, gender mixing, and neglect of obligatory duties, warning that such practices could lead to moral laxity and the dilution of Islamic teachings.⁴ These critiques reflect a strong emphasis on *"taḥdhīr"* (caution), aiming to preserve orthodoxy and safeguard the integrity of Islamic worship.

Conversely, other scholars adopted a more accommodating approach. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), in *"Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī 'Amal al-Mawlid"*, argued that Mawlūd, although not explicitly practiced by the Prophet or his Companions, can be classified as a *"bid'ah ḥasanah"* (commendable innovation) if observed with proper intention and within the limits of Shariah.⁵ Similarly, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) maintained that Mawlūd is

¹ Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion*.

² Oloso, "Faith and Identity in Contemporary Yoruba Islam." *Journal of Religion in Africa*.

³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*.

⁴ Ibn al-Hājj, *al-Madkhal*.

⁵ Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid*.

permissible provided it involves permissible acts such as feeding the poor, reciting the Qur'an, and narrating the Prophet's biography.¹ These scholars emphasized the "maqāṣid" (objectives) of cultivating love for the Prophet, strengthening communal bonds, and reinforcing Islamic values.

A harmonized perspective acknowledges both the caution of reformist scholars and the constructive potential emphasized by pro-Mawlūd voices. On one hand, the warnings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Ḥājj remain relevant in curbing excesses, preventing commercialization, and ensuring that Mawlūd does not overshadow obligatory acts of worship. On the other hand, the permissive arguments of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn Ḥajar highlight the importance of love for the Prophet as a central component of faith and recognize Mawlūd as a pedagogical and communal tool when observed within ethical boundaries. For today's Muslims, especially in culturally diverse contexts like Yorubaland, Nigeria, this harmonized approach suggests that Mawlūd can be upheld as a legitimate practice if observed responsibly—focusing on Qur'anic recitation, Sīrah narration, feeding the needy, and promoting unity, while avoiding extravagance and practices contrary to Shariah. This middle path resonates with the Qur'anic injunction to be a "community of moderation" (Qur'an 2:143). It allows Muslims to express devotion emotionally and communally without compromising intellectual fidelity to the foundations of the faith.

Thus, a prudent intellectual stance is neither outright rejection nor uncritical acceptance, but rather responsible engagement—appreciating Mawlūd as an expression of love for the Prophet while remaining vigilant against excesses. This harmonization bridges intellectual reasoning and emotional devotion, offering a balanced framework that contemporary Muslims can uphold in the spirit of both tradition and renewal. Table 1 presents a harmonization of classical Muslim scholars' opinions on Mawlūd.

Table 1: Harmonization of Classical Muslim Scholars' Opinions on Mawlūd

Scholar	Position	Rationale	Contemporary Relevance
Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328)	Against	Saw Mawlūd as <i>bid'ah</i> with no precedent in early Islam; innovations risk corrupting pure worship (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2001).	Warns Muslims against excesses and helps preserve orthodoxy in worship practices.
Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1336)	Against	Criticized extravagance, moral laxity, and diversion from obligatory duties linked	Highlights dangers of commercialization and un-Islamic practices during celebrations.

¹ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*.

Scholar	Position	Rationale	Contemporary Relevance
Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449)	Support (Conditional)	to Mawlūd (Ibn al-Ḥājj, 1981). Permissible if it involves lawful acts (e.g., Qurʾan recitation, feeding the poor, Sīrah narration) (Brown, 2014).	Provides framework for a moderate Mawlūd that aligns with Shariah boundaries.
Al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)	Support (Qualified)	Classified Mawlūd as <i>bidʿah ḥasanah</i> if done with good intention, reinforcing love for the Prophet (al-Suyūṭī, 2001).	Legitimizes Mawlūd as a devotional and educational tool that strengthens communal bonds.

Implications of the Study

The study highlights the necessity of balancing intellectual reasoning and emotional expression in Islamic practice. By harmonizing classical opinions on Mawlūd, contemporary Muslims are reminded that theological debates should not be reduced to rigid binaries of “permissible” versus “forbidden.” Instead, the study suggests that nuanced theological frameworks are needed to respect both orthodoxy and devotion. This approach fosters a faith practice that is both textually grounded and spiritually enriching.

Findings indicate that Mawlūd functions as an informal yet influential tool for religious education, particularly in conveying the Prophet’s biography (Sīrah) to younger generations. This suggests that Islamic scholars and educators can utilize Mawlūd as a pedagogical platform to cultivate love for the Prophet, enhance religious literacy, and reinforce values of unity and compassion. The implication is that the responsible integration of Mawlūd into Islamic pedagogy can enrich contemporary Muslim learning environments.

The celebration of Mawlūd among Yoruba Muslims illustrates how Islamic practices adapt within local cultural contexts. This study suggests that scholars and community leaders should recognize the cultural embeddedness of religious rituals and avoid simplistic condemnations of practices that hold deep communal significance. By acknowledging the cultural dimension of Mawlūd, Muslim communities can preserve their identity while ensuring that practices remain within the boundaries of Shariah.

One of the key findings is that Mawlūd fosters communal solidarity through shared emotional experiences. This suggests that Mawlūd can serve as a social glue, promoting unity, reducing intra-community fragmentation, and strengthening Muslim identity in pluralistic contexts such as Yoruba land. This underscores the need for religious leaders to

approach the Mawlūd debate not only from a doctrinal perspective but also from a socio-communal standpoint.

The study demonstrates that religious authority in Yoruba Islam is shaped by scholars' ability to balance rational argumentation with emotional resonance. This suggests that contemporary religious leaders must avoid rigid dogmatism and instead cultivate legitimacy by addressing both the intellectual and emotional needs of their communities. Therefore, authority should be exercised with sensitivity to both scriptural fidelity and communal aspirations.

Given the ongoing debates surrounding Mawlūd, this study holds significant implications for Islamic councils and policymakers in Muslim-majority societies. By adopting a harmonized stance, religious institutions can mediate between reformist and traditionalist perspectives, thereby reducing conflict and polarization. This approach can foster peaceful coexistence, prevent sectarian fragmentation, and promote a culture of tolerance within the broader Muslim ummah.

The study contributes to the sociology of religion by demonstrating how ritual practices such as Mawlūd embody the tension between orthodoxy and popular devotion. Future research could build on this by comparing Yoruba contexts with other Muslim societies where Mawlūd is contested, such as those in North Africa or South Asia. This comparative perspective suggests that Mawlūd can serve as a lens for understanding how global Islamic traditions negotiate faith, culture, and identity.

Ultimately, the study suggests that contemporary Muslims should adopt a “safe stance” on Mawlūd by balancing intellectual caution with emotional devotion. Mawlūd should be celebrated responsibly—with Qur’an recitations, acts of charity, and remembrance of the Prophet—while avoiding extravagance and un-Islamic practices. This balanced approach ensures that Muslims remain faithful to the spirit of Islam while meaningfully engaging with their cultural and communal realities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores the complex negotiations between intellectual reasoning and emotional expression in the discourses of Yoruba Muslim scholars regarding the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (Mawlūd). The findings reveal that the debate is deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, with some scholars strictly opposing Mawlūd as an innovation, while others justify it as a commendable practice when observed within Shariah limits. In Yoruba contexts, this debate is further shaped by cultural aesthetics, communal solidarity, and the dynamics of religious authority. By harmonizing these perspectives, the study demonstrates that Mawlūd functions not merely as a contested ritual but as a meaningful practice through which Muslims express devotion, assert identity, and negotiate authority. Ultimately, the safest intellectual and practical position lies in embracing Mawlūd as a tool for devotion and education while safeguarding against excesses and un-

Islamic practices. Based on the overall findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Islamic scholars and educators should integrate both classical cautionary arguments and constructive justifications into religious education. This approach will help Muslims appreciate the theological depth of the Mawlūd debate and avoid simplistic positions of either absolute rejection or uncritical acceptance.
2. Mawlūd should be responsibly used as a medium for narrating the Prophet's biography (Sīrah), teaching Islamic values, and fostering love for the Prophet, especially among youth and new generations of Muslims.
3. Community leaders should establish guidelines to ensure that Mawlūd celebrations remain within the boundaries of Shariah. Practices such as Qur'an recitation, poetry, and feeding the poor should be encouraged, while extravagance, commercial exploitation, and morally questionable activities should be discouraged.
4. Mawlūd should be regarded as a unifying practice that strengthens Muslim communal identity within pluralistic societies. Scholars and leaders must present Mawlūd not as a source of division but as an opportunity to foster dialogue and harmony among diverse Islamic traditions.
5. Religious leaders must balance rational arguments with emotional resonance to remain relevant to their communities. A harmonized approach that integrates both intellectual rigor and spiritual devotion will enhance their legitimacy and authority.
6. Scholars should expand research on Mawlūd by comparing Yoruba experiences with those of other Muslim societies in Africa and beyond. Such comparative studies will enhance our understanding of how global Muslim communities navigate the intersections of orthodoxy, culture, and devotion in relation to Mawlūd.

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