



Countering physical violence with rhetorical violence: Contextual analysis of a sermon by the Nigerian cleric, Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam (d. 2007)

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Abstract

Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam was a famous Muslim cleric whose missionary career has left an indelible mark on Nigerian Muslim society. An intrepid scholar who at times employed uncompromising language, his assassination in 2007 further enhanced his iconicity. Across Nigeria and even beyond, he remains a key scholarly reference. This paper discusses one of his sermons, known as the OPC sermon¹, which has enjoyed wide circulation. One of the most strident speeches that Ja'far delivered amid a bloody turmoil that sprouted in southern Nigeria in 2000, the OPC sermon may be considered his harshest public talk. However, rather than further fuelling tension, it proved to be a peace-advocating intervention that eventually contributed to containing and preventing what could have become a large-scale conflict between major ethnic and religious communities. While my discussion focuses primarily on a clip of the sermon, other sources that my discussion considers include Human Rights Watch reports, public accounts, and comments related to the turmoil. The OPC sermon has so far received no academic attention. I contend that, stripped of its context, the sermon may be interpreted as a public expression that contributes to tension. I further argue that Ja'far's OPC sermon prevented both reprisal attacks against innocent Nigerians and increased violence.

Introduction

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed public disturbances often caused by political struggles and regional and ethno-religious competition. Bloody tribal and ethnic clashes, recurring terrorism, banditry and kidnappings, have all reached flashpoints, challenging the consolidation of democratic politics in the country. Within a few months of the civilian takeover upon the return of democracy in 1999, internecine clashes involving various ethnic and religious groups erupted in different parts of Nigeria, particularly in the south-west zone, the Yorubaland where President Obasanjo² hailed from. The clashes

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were mostly caused by minor disputes that would quickly escalate to large-scale violence. In the south-western states, the skirmishes usually broke between the Yorubas and Muslim northerners³ (Hausas, Fulanis, Kanuris, Nupes, etc.) and in some cases between the Igbos and the south-southern Ijaw people, who have been successful businessmen in the zone. Both the northerners and the Igbos were considered alien settlers, and their economic prosperity was often viewed negatively by their host counterparts. During crises, the Yorubas counted on armed ethnic militia groups which helped them fight their rivals, the settlers. The most notorious of these Yoruba militia groups was the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) that was founded in 1994.

Because Nigeria is an ethnically and religiously pluralistic country, with Islam as the major religion followed by Christianity, interreligious and intercultural encounters among its citizens are inherent, and this comes into play in the country's politics which since independence has been mired in stiff competition between Muslims and Christians for supremacy. Through their preaching and regular sermons, clerics play crucial roles in the eruption, escalation, or containment of conflicts. Furthermore, they prove indispensable in managing various types of social crises. This makes sermons in Nigeria a very important conduit for engaging with both religious and sociopolitical issues. Throughout the history of Islam, religious sermonizing has been used for political purposes, for mobilising the Muslim community and alerting them to existing or impending dangers. This is reflected in one study that examines the manifestation of politics in religious sermons which reveals

as anti-Muslim. The forced resignation of top Muslim army officers and rapid promotion of Christians, in addition to many other government decisions, ignited popular discontent that resulted in the mysterious short-lived return of the presidency to the North, which then shifted back to the South owing to the death of Obasanjo's anointed, ill successor Umar Musa 'Yar'adua in office in May 2010. Obasanjo was in the top list of political leaders whose moves were closely and critically monitored by Ja'far and against whom the latter relentlessly unleashed a series of clerical censures.

1 OPC refers to Oodua People's Congress and is popular with its abbreviation as OPC.

2 Olusegun Obasanjo (b. 1937) was Nigeria's military head of state from 1976 to 1979 and he was elected under the platform of People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999 during the return of civilian rule. He served for two terms until 2007 when he was succeeded by the late Umaru Musa 'Yar'adua. Obasanjo's rule was vehemently criticised by northern Nigerians particularly as some of his policies were viewed

3 Both government and private media particularly in the South largely describe them merely as Hausa insofar they are Muslims and especially if they speak the Hausa language. In fact, even migrants from countries like Niger Republic who expectedly speak Hausa, are generally passed off as Hausa northern Muslims in the South.

that, out of ten Christian leaders who gave sermons, seven tended to discuss political topics.⁴

The sermon is a well-entrenched tradition and serves as one of the most effective platforms for mass education, discussing religious matters, and communicating messages to the public, but also as a medium for channelling popular grievances to those in authority. In their essay on the impact of popular religious preaching, Hatim Mahamid and Younis Abu Alhajja argue that religious gatherings draw their significance and success from, among other things, 'the influence of scholars and their religious status within society'.⁵ Syarifuddin observes that peoples' social conditions, backgrounds, and organisation often affect and determine the dominant themes of sermons while public perceptions of issues as they unfold are shaped and influenced by the person delivering the sermon.⁶ Birgit Meyer and Abdoulaye Sounaye have reminded us of how sermons help preachers to become authoritative and iconic figures while noting the possibility of fiery sermons triggering tensions.⁷ The figure of our study became popular in Nigeria's religious sphere due to many factors, but his fame owes greatly to his weekly sermons, charisma, and the sensitivity of the topics he discussed.

Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam (d. 2007) was a famous Nigerian Muslim scholar who, according to one writer, 'attracted millions of followers'.⁸ His missionary career has left an indelible mark on Nigerian Muslim society, while his public speeches, in which he addressed different topics on domestic and global happenings, have significantly impacted his followers, the broader Muslim community, and Nigerian society at large. Even more than fifteen years after his assassination, Ja'far is still regarded as a scholarly reference on religious, social, and political issues by both members of his religious group and others, namely Sufis. Notwithstanding the unique moderation that distinguished his mission, Ja'far was a charismatic and intrepid scholar whose approach to addressing sensitive themes at times led him to employ confrontational and discourteous language. This also characterises his popular OPC sermon, which he presented on 20 October 2000 in Kano at Almunatada Mosque, Dorayi, a major religious centre established in 1997 by the Almunatada Islamic Trust based in London.

This paper appraises the OPC sermon, which arguably remains the most strident public homily that Ja'far delivered amid a bloody ethno-religious clash. The clash initially erupted in southern Nigeria and was almost replicated in the Muslim north but for the timely intervention of a confluence of factors, notably including Ja'far's public address. No academic study thus far has analysed this very popular sermon which, given its turbocharging nature, is capable of misleading audiences, particularly if it is stripped of its contextual background. This sermon

is one of the popular speeches that make Ja'far an iconic figure. Yet, it cannot be factually established that the sermon cost him his life, though it may constitute one of the points that might have led to his assassination. After all, after his death, fingers of blame were brandished against various groups that constantly featured in his public addresses, including political and religious groups, but also international organisations. Siding with the cause and plight of the masses to the point of leading a liberation movement or a call for social justice even as this may have borne drastic consequences, as evidenced in Ja'far's OPC sermon, along with his accomplished clerical career, have made him a key public figure. His case illustrates the ways in which preaching contributes to the iconization process of a religious figure.

This paper provides a broader context that helps make sense of the OPC sermon by linking the issues discussed to facts and documented events. It adds to our understanding of the complications and blame-games that surrounded the turmoil while opening a window into regional and ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. While documenting this particular crisis and Ja'far's intervention, it also provides additional perspective on peace and conflict resolution, in particular as it illustrates a clerical engagement with politics, exemplifying the role of religious scholars as mediators between government and civil society. Ja'far fits Jacob Olidort and Quintain Wiktorowicz's categorisation of Salafi politicians or activists who are not manipulated by regimes and who often conduct political analyses and delve into 'public discourse on contextual and contemporary social issues and development, and at times counselling governments'.⁹

I begin by offering a brief biography of Ja'far, highlighting his educational profile, and significant milestones and turning points in his career as a Muslim scholar. I then move on to provide a contextual background of the sermon, including its motives, major preoccupations, and the points raised by Ja'far. Before I conclude, I offer a brief discussion that seeks to establish that, despite its harsh criticism of political leaders and public figures, the sermon served the national interest by contributing to peace and stability in Nigeria.

Brief biography of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam

Ja'far Mahmud Adam was one of the most prominent Muslim scholars in Nigeria. He was born in 1961 or 1962 in Daura, one of the oldest cities of northern Nigeria. He began his basic Qur'anic education in a family known for its scholarship that hosts a local school and has produced numerous memorizers of Qur'an. His grandfather, Mallam Adamu, was a renowned scholar and expert in Maliki jurisprudence¹⁰ within Sunni Islam.¹¹ Following his uncle, Mallam Haruna, Ja'far moved to Kano in 1971.

⁴ Boussalis et al. 2020.

⁵ Mahamid and Abu Alhajja. 2024: 58

⁶ Syarifuddin et al. 2020: 147–148.

⁷ Meyer and Sounaye. 2017: 2, 4.

⁸ Anonymous. 2012: 118.

⁹ Olidort 2015. See also Wiktorowicz 2006.

¹⁰ Nasidi and Inda 2016.

¹¹ There are four distinctly major Sunni schools of jurisprudence, namely the Maliki School, the Hanafi School, the Shafi'i School and the Hambali School. They were named after their founders whose teachings represented the hallmarks of the jurisprudential corpus of Sunni Islam across various centuries within Islamic history.

There, he joined a Qur'anic school headed by Mallam Abdallah Dan Zarmo, a Tuareg native of Niger Republic. Ja'far made several sojourns to places outside Kano including Niger Republic, all in his bid to memorise the Qur'an, which he accomplished in 1978.¹² In Kano, Ja'far joined some informal religious circles where he studied different fields of Islamic sciences with various scholars. Similarly, on personal initiative, Ja'far enrolled in formal schools; the Masallaci Adult Evening Classes at Shahuci in 1982, the Egyptian Cultural Centre and Government Arabic Teachers College (GATC), Gwale in Kano, where he acquired English literacy, more Arabic proficiency, but also diplomas that would enable him to further his studies at tertiary institutions.¹³

Meanwhile, as he grew and began maturing as a promising student, Ja'far participated in the newly formed Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah (or Izala for short), a religious revivalist movement that is aimed at reforming Islam and eradicating innovations. Izala is an umbrella organisation for Salafis, founded in 1978 along the teachings of Shaykh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi¹⁴ and since then, it has been operating within Hausa-speaking communities in Nigeria, and beyond. Ja'far rose from a lowly position to become one of its chief preachers, delivering public talks and lectures throughout the 1980s. Between 1986 and 1988, Ja'far took part in a series of Qur'anic competitions at various levels in Nigeria. He recorded a resounding success when in 1986 he represented the country in the international contest that was held in Saudi Arabia. In 1989, Ja'far succeeded in his bid to join the Islamic University, Madina (IUM) after a successful interaction with the recruitment team of the university headed by Dr. Muhammad Ibn Abdallah Zarban al-Gamidi. Ja'far was offered an admission and he joined the College of Qur'an and Islamic Studies of the IUM and graduated in 1993, after undergoing rigorous intellectual and ideological transformations.

Back in Nigeria, Ja'far re-entered the Da'wah arena, joining proselytization activities and delivering Islamic lectures, lessons, and sermons. These efforts were addressed not only to the public, but also to the groups of disciples that formed around him while he endeavoured to disseminate Islamic knowledge. Within that context, he distanced himself from unionism.¹⁵ He became a popular Qur'anic interpreter, preacher, jurist, orator but also a thinker and public analyst who offered critical views on both domestic and international affairs. Ja'far utilised various public platforms and religious centres such as Uthman Bin Affan Mosque, Al-Muntada Mosque at Dorayi (both in Kano), Indimi Mosque, Maiduguri and other places where he conducted Islamic teachings, Qur'anic exegesis, weekly sermons, periodic lectures, and occa-

sional seminars. His teachings and lectures covered various themes related to the Qur'an, Hadith, Tawhid, Fiqh, Sirah, Arabic, etc.

Such a commitment, in addition to his series of engagements in religious discourses with various groups including Sufi brotherhoods, secular intellectuals, politicians, and key actors in Nigeria's public sphere contributed to his rapid fame, making him one of the most prominent Islamic scholars in Nigeria and across West Africa. Amid his rising popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ja'far strove to pursue a master's degree, joining the OIC-funded International University of Africa, Khartoum, where he graduated in 2003.¹⁶ In 2005 he secured admission and began his doctoral studies at Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto, with a project entitled: 'Comparative Study of the Universality of the Qur'anic Message and the New World Order'. He was murdered before he completed his dissertation.¹⁷

Bold, fearless, intrepid, and committed to his activities, Ja'far was vehemently opposed to the victimization and oppression of (weak) Muslims wherever they were in the world; he was very critical of acts of terrorism in the name of Islam, politics, or regionalism. He was among the first to privately engage with and publicly challenge the extremist movement founded by Muhammad Yusuf, which would become Boko Haram. The movement is notorious for its deadly attacks on both Nigerian security and innocent civilians. Ja'far consistently censured the group and its offshoots and dissected their ideological misconceptions, while raising an alarm on the threats posed by the groups and calling the attention of authorities to Muhammad Yusuf.

That earned him not only criticism from the various groups he disagreed with, but also death threats. Nevertheless, he persisted in his mission and cause. Although bold and at times confrontational, especially with parties that he believed responsible for the suffering of the masses, his speech did not cause any uproar or violent reaction.¹⁸ In the early hours of Friday, 13 April 2007, Ja'far was assassinated in cold blood by unknown gunmen while leading the fajr (dawn) prayer at his mosque in Dorayi, Kano. Ja'far's mission received wide posthumous attention, with hundreds of thousands of Muslims in northern Nigeria defecting to his camp and embracing his teachings, which still circulate as audio-visual files. Ja'far's views and ideas continue to shape the socio-religious and political worldviews of many Nigerians. As one scholar has put it, Ja'far became an object of 'canonization' in death.¹⁹

After the return of civilian rule in 1999, which provided freedom of expression, Ja'far paid special attention to politics. He utilised his authoritative platforms to make critical commentaries on governance and politics. At the time, Muslims in Nigeria were blaming the Obasanjo-led

¹² Labaran 2008: 9–10.

¹³ Kane 2003: 109.

¹⁴ Gumi (d.1992) was the first indigenous Salafi scholar to refute Sufi creeds and rituals. One of his students Ismaila Idris founded Izala and the group considered Gumi as patron. For more on this and Gumi's career, see Gumi and Tsiga 1992.

¹⁵ Rijiyar Lemo 2011: 34.

¹⁶ Labaran 2008: 37.

¹⁷ Interview with Professor Isa Maishanu (24 March 2022), a professor of Islamic Studies who served as Ja'far's supervisor.

¹⁸ Mabera 2008: 30.

¹⁹ Thurston 2016: 245.

Federal Government for marginalising Muslims, but also treating their Christian counterparts with brazen favouritism. Ja'far dedicated many of his sermons to criticising Obasanjo's policies and programmes while he also forayed into regional and state politics. He was a towering figure in the restoration of Shari'a (Islamic criminal law) in Muslim states, a role that brought him closer to key northern authorities.

Ja'far's insistence on scripture-based religiosity and advocacy of the strict practice of correct Islam represents the hallmarks of a reform he promoted and which also influenced the religious sphere in Hausaphone Africa. He engaged religious groups and sects, ongoing socio-political developments in Nigeria and beyond, expressing critical views and positions. His political stands, commitment to reform, positions on education and family issues brought him a wide range of supporters and sympathisers who continued to follow his teachings even after his death. All this contributed to making him an iconic figure who continues to be remembered as one of the most influential contemporary Muslim scholars in the Hausa-speaking world. Overall, Ja'far's discourse and reform missions manifest themselves not only in his ideas on religion, governance, education, economics, marriage and family institutions, but also in the social programmes and humanitarian initiatives he championed.²⁰ He became an icon through a combination of these factors.

The sermon and its contextual background

Ja'far delivered the 40-minute sermon in the Hausa language on 20 October 2000 at the Almunta Mosque of Dorayi in Kano amid a bloody mayhem occurring in Lagos – hundreds of kilometres away. At the time the sermon was being delivered, the violence there was still not under control. It was prompted by clerical concern to halt a wave of terror against defenceless Muslims. Among Hausa-speaking Muslims, the sermon was (and is still) known as OPC, an eponymous reference to the central organisation, the Oodua People's Congress, involved in the massacre that took place in some parts of Lagos beginning on Sunday, 15 October 2000. The communal violence was triggered by the murder of a Muslim northerner who was accused of receiving stolen goods. The man was subsequently arrested by the OPC. Despite pleas from those who knew him, he was slaughtered on the spot by the OPC.²¹ This was followed by raids on northerners who protested the killing, and within a short time, the OPC mobilised and began massacring northerners. As a result, streets and several other areas of Lagos were littered with dead bodies, as thick smoke bellowed from burnt houses,

market stalls, vehicles, and other properties.²² Apart from the hundreds of northerners killed, most of whom were Muslims, thousands of families (estimated at 20,000) were forced to flee their homes. Many expected the Lagos massacre to 'lead to retaliatory attacks against Yorubas living in northern cities',²³ an act that would not have directly affected OPC, the main culprit.

The Oodua People's Congress (OPC) was established in 1994 after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election which was believed by many to have been won by MKO Abiola, a wealthy Yoruba merchant and philanthropist who stood against Alhaji Bashir Usman Tofa, another businessman from Kano who was backed by the Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida-led military government. The OPC is an ethnic militia founded to defend the interest of the Yoruba people in Nigeria and provide Yorubaland with local security through vigilantism.²⁴ Part of its agenda is also to advocate for autonomy, self-determination, or even complete independence by creating a separate republic.²⁵ The group was headed by educated Yoruba, both Muslims and Christians. Its social base now comprises 'mostly unemployed young men who act as a parallel police force, armed with machetes and guns, in return for protection money.'²⁶ Associated with 'lynching' and 'illegal detention',²⁷ the OPC often intervened in small ethnic disputes, not only siding with their tribesmen, but also taking on the fight and expanding its scope to other areas of Nigeria. OPC is known for subjecting its victims to most cruel and brutal treatment. Notable clashes between northerners (often referred to as Hausas) and Yoruba people broke out, among several other places, in Sagamu of Ogun State in July 1999, Ketu/Mile, 12, Lagos in November 1999, Alaba International Market, Lagos in July 2000, Ibadan of Oyo State in June 2000, Ilorin of Kwara State in October 2001. Some of these crises triggered reprisal attacks against innocent people who shared similar tribal or religious affiliation with the perpetrators of the south-west massacres. In the aftermath of the 1999 Sagamu clash, in which hundreds of northern Nigerian Muslims were ruthlessly murdered, an armed mob in Kano took to the streets and unleashed violence against innocent Yoruba Christians. In fact, the mob went to the point of killing Yoruba who could not say Hausa words that they were asked to pronounce. This parallels the same strategy the OPC also used to fish out non-Yorubas during ethnic clashes in the southwest. In 2000, fighting reached a flashpoint and attracted great public attention due to the casualties the OPC inflicted upon northern Muslims. An Igbo eyewitness detailed the gory sight of one of the murderous attacks on northerners by the OPC, which lasted more than a day:

²⁰ For a comprehensive work on the life, career, mission, ideas and thoughts of Ja'far which takes into account his different spheres of his public engagements, see a bilingual doctoral dissertation written by Ismail Hashim Abubakar and entitled "Contemporary Islamic Thought in Northern Nigeria: Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud as a Case Study". The dissertation was submitted to the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed V University, Rabat in 2023. The author is reworking the manuscript to publish it as a book.

²¹ Aluko 2000.

²² Aluko 2000.

²³ The Guardian 2000.

²⁴ Nolte 2017.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch 2003.

²⁶ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2007.

²⁷ Ibid.

We saw people in a group holding machetes and dangerous weapons. They were OPC, wearing uniforms. They were stopping commercial vehicles [...] Anyone suspected of being a northerner was brought down [...] They asked the person to speak their own language (Yoruba) or Igbo. If they failed, they cut their heads with machetes. They cut them, then set them ablaze with fuel. [...] The OPC killed Hausa for two days in that place. There were corpses littered all around. I saw more than thirty-six dead.²⁸

The corpses of the Muslims killed were transported to the north by trucks, and by Thursday, 19 October 2000, there were many burnt and mutilated corpses in the city of Kano. The situation in Kano became tense, and there were fears that any moment reprisal attacks would be launched against innocent Yorubas and Christians. The next day, Ja'far climbed the Almutada pulpit at Dorayi in Kano and delivered the Friday sermon that can be, arguably, described as his wildest, most uncompromising but ironically, inherently peace-advocating public address. The OPC sermon, which circulated widely across the country, extensively discussed the OPC atrocities against Muslim northerners in Lagos.

Mournful reflections on the Mayhem and venting spleen of revenge

In the sermon, Ja'far began by mourning the Muslims killed in the clashes between Monday, 16 October and Thursday, 19 October. Ja'far put the death toll at more than 1000, in addition to the property destroyed, such as lorries, cars, shops, and houses owned by Muslims. According to him, all this happened with the endorsement of the Yoruba political elite, the Government of Lagos State, the Federal Government, and Oyo State Government. Ja'far warned that the situation threatened peaceful coexistence and could lead to a large-scale war. He regretted that instead of extinguishing the fire of strife that was burning in the country, authorities fuelled the clashes. Blaming security forces, he alleged that for 3 full days, the police remained a passive observer and did not even fire tear gas while Muslims were being killed:

How come that our brothers would be killed for 3 days, about 68 hours being slaughtered and killed nonstop? The SSS [State Security Service] were there, soldiers were there, the police were there, the President was around as he had not travelled, members of the federal House of Representatives and senators were there, customary authorities were there, our scholars were there. Everybody is just mute and watching. Everybody is mute and none has said anything, our politicians are just watching.²⁹

We should know that it is now three consecutive days, people were being killed, being burnt, being slaughtered, their shops being burnt, being robbed, Muslim women being raped. And all this should end in silence? And then a claim for peace in the country is made?³⁰

²⁸ Human Rights Watch 2003.

²⁹ Ja'far Mahmud Adam, Friday sermon known as "OPC" and coded 069-CD-WEB HUDUBAH, delivered at Almutada Mosque, Dorayi, Kano on 20 October 2000.

³⁰ Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

Slightly differing from Ja'far's account, the report by Human Rights Watch notes that the fighting began on Sunday, 15 October and continued to Thursday, 19 October 2000.³¹ To underline that the 2000 attacks were not the first incidents of OPC atrocities against Muslims and northerners in general, Ja'far recalled that similar massive killings had taken place at Sagamu a year before. The ascent of a Yoruba man to power in 1999 had been exploited by a section of his kinsmen to perpetrate violence in their ethnic territory.³² After all, Ja'far alleged, the culprits behind the Sagamu massacre, who were never brought to justice, were the same belligerents that had taken part in the 2000 Lagos brutality. Ja'far argued that the main goal of the OPC, as it was enjoying the institutional backing of government, was to expel all non-Yoruba from 'their states'. But non-Yoruba northern Muslims were their main enemy, to be driven out of every corner of the southwest, although Yoruba were also spread across all other parts of the country pursuing their ventures undeterred. Ja'far reminded the audience that the reprisal skirmishes that had ensued in Kano were the result of the mishandling of the Sagamu crisis by authorities. Ja'far suggested that a lack of legal action by authorities would lead to more heinous reprisal attacks.

The crisis was generally depicted by the media and interpreted by public analysts as ethnic clashes between Yoruba and Hausa northerners. But Ja'far contended that, although ethnic politics was a motivating factor, it was a religious war, and Muslims would continue to view it as such. To justify his assertion, Ja'far queried why mosques and Islamiyya schools were burnt while an imam was dragged and brutally hacked to death in front of his house. Ja'far then directed this sentiment to leaders as a working formula to inform the steps and measures needed, appealing that 'our leaders should not try to persuade us that the fight was only ethnic. We will continue to regard it as a religious war and all measures we will take will be guided by religion'.³³

The rationale here was, if the impasse could be successfully depicted and accepted as an ethnic dispute, then the demand for justice or attempts at retaliation would be made by mainly Hausa people, who happened to be the major victims. But if it was considered a religious war against Islam and Muslims, as Ja'far tried to frame it, then all Muslims would be involved in pushing for investigations, redress, or even revenge if things were to get out of hand. Ja'far might have been right to view the fight through a religious lens in light of what he narrated. How-

³¹ Human Rights Watch 2003: 16.

³² According to the report of Human Rights Watch, the Sagamu crisis broke out in July 1999 between Yoruba and Hausa in Sagamu town of Southwestern Ogun State, the native state of President Obasanjo. The crisis was caused by the killing of a Hausa woman who violated the night curfew law imposed during a traditional festival being held by the Yoruba. Soon the OPC took on the fight and this culminated in the murder of 68 people including minors and other forms of destruction. For details, see Human Rights Watch report titled 'Killings and Abuses of OPC', available on <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/nigeria0203/nigeriaopc0203-03.htm#:~:text=In%20mid%20July%201999%2C%20there,either%20before%20or%20since%201999,> accessed July 20, 2024.

³³ Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

ever, the fact that there were Yoruba Muslims among the OPC militia and that they had spared Yoruba Muslims and their religious symbolism, lends stronger credence to the ethnic dimension of the OPC offensive. However, it cannot be refuted that northerners living in the southwest, most of whom spoke Hausa but came from diverse cultural backgrounds and were also largely Muslims, were mainly identified as Hausa, and when violence erupted, they were killed even if they denied being Hausa at all. Eyewitnesses of some of the clashes told Human Rights Watch that one Alhaji Zubairu from Kogi State and another Bako, a Zabarma from Kebbi State, were killed even though they denied being Hausa.³⁴ The regional and geographic dimensions involved manifested in the killing of non-Muslim northerners, and interestingly, Ja'far would count on this eventuality when calling upon northern governors to decisively intervene in the matter. In any case, according to Ja'far, the clashes that led to the killing of northerners in the southwest were beating the drum of war and in the event that authorities failed to take appropriate measures, Ja'far warned that Muslims might be left with no option but to reply in the same language of violence, using a religious template as a guide:

Once we understand that the verses and hadiths of the religion tell us that we should on so... so minute, on so... so day of so... so date, that it is time, all excuses have been exhausted, and that it is time to come out and destabilise the country and die, wallahi we will come out and destabilise the country. Nothing will prevent us from doing this. We will perceive it as a religious fight, and nobody will divert our thinking and distract/swerve our minds to any other thing else.³⁵

Ja'far cited several Qur'anic verses to establish that the enemies of Islam and Muslims would exploit any weakness they perceived in the latter to subjugate them and subject them to disgrace. He alleged that the perpetrators of the present violence had done what they did because they were confident nothing would be done, given that they had backers among top state and federal government officials.

The parties to blame

Ja'far argued that the appointment by President Obasanjo of Chief Bola Ige,³⁶ a former governor of Oyo State, as the federal minister of justice between 2000 and 2001 was meant to provide an official cover to the atrocities that would be committed by the OPC, so that they would not be adequately dealt with via the legal machinery. After all, courts and other legal organs in the country were under his authority. Ja'far accused Bola Ige of being a stakeholder in the OPC and its sister organisation, Afenifere, another Yoruba cultural group Ja'far dismissed as forming with OPC the faces of the same coin. In its role, Afenifere served as the mouthpiece of the Yoruba and took care of

³⁴ Human Rights Watch 2003: 13, 22.

³⁵ Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

³⁶ Bola Ige was first appointed by President Obasanjo as Minister of Mines and Power in 1999 and was later transferred to the Ministry of Justice in 2000. He was killed in December 2001 at his home in the southwestern city of Ibadan in Oyo state.

their diplomatic, political, and journalistic agendas. At the funerals of Bola Ige in Ibadan in December 2001, OPC militias were seen taking over the security and protection of the gathering that consisted of top government functionaries, including President Obasanjo.³⁷

Bola Ige was one of the eight parties which Ja'far held responsible for the massacre of Muslims in Lagos, the central party being the federal government headed by Obasanjo which he accused of not having acted decisively to halt the mass murder even as it continued for more than three consecutive days. Here, Ja'far was obviously relying on the reports that would be confirmed later by investigations conducted by the Human Rights Watch that the security in Lagos turned blind eyes as northerners were being put in the bloodbath. Furthermore, the investigation revealed that security apparatuses in the state 'did not intervene at any stage of the killings',³⁸ which enabled the OPC to slaughter their victims unimpeded. The investigations faulted the Nigerian army as affected northerners had to bribe the soldiers before they were taken to army barracks for protection.³⁹ Ja'far explored the swiftness with which President Obasanjo acted when ethno-religious crises erupted in Kaduna State, which lasted for one and a half days. The president then, as Ja'far revealed, threatened to impeach the Kaduna State governor and impose emergency rule in the state. Ja'far roared that justice and equal treatment of citizens demanded that the same fierce warning be made against the actions of then Lagos State governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who was another party suspected of having a role in the events.

According to Ja'far, there were allegations that Bola Tinubu was among the supporters of the OPC who procured weapons for the militias and financed their terrorist activities. Ja'far reminded that there was a time the governor convened a peace meeting between the leaders of the OPC, leaders of Hausa and Igbo communities, as well as the police to design a peace pact in the state. The police, Hausa leaders and the Igbo leaders signed the peace pact, unlike OPC leaders. The remaining parties that shared blame according to Ja'far included Tinubu's counterpart, the Oyo State governor, Lam Adesina, the Inspector General of Police, Mr. Nuhu Smith, the minister of Police Affairs, the retired Major-General Jemmy Bowen, and the OPC leader. These people were Yorubas known for promoting an ethnic agenda that at times threatened secession from Nigeria's federation. Ja'far urged the government to take actions against all those involved and stated that, in his view, they should all be executed without trial since they masterminded or refused to act while unarmed civilians were helplessly killed. Ja'far reiterated his threat that failure to do so could result in drastic consequences of large-scale reprisals.

Addressing northern leaders and Muslim public

Ja'far then turned to northern leaders whose people were killed, hence had the duty to stand in the quest and agitation for justice. He channelled the call to three important

³⁷ Human Rights Watch 2003: 10.

³⁸ Ibid.: 19.

³⁹ Ibid.: 19.

segments of the northern society: the 19 governors of the northern states, the traditional rulers, and northern legislators in the National Assembly. Ja'far pointed out that the Lagos massacre was part of the general fight against the north and northerners, and that the governors had a duty to, without any discrimination, fight for the north. Thus, he said, 'we are addressing you in the language of the northern concern, because we know among them some are not Muslims. Hence, the war is also on Arewa (the north) since they are 'yan Arewa (northerners)'.⁴⁰ Here, Ja'far invoked regional sentiments (Arewa-centrism) to portray the agitation as an inclusive clarion call, thus partly downplaying the religious dimension of the crises. But he would later return to the religious model in addressing the Muslim rulers who traced their origin to the theocratic system that predated the colonial rule that founded and structured Nigeria. Muslim hereditary rulers (*sarakuna*) are regarded as religious leaders since they are descendants of Danfodio, and despite their political influence having been weakened by British colonial rule, they still enjoy great respect among the Muslim populace; more so than political leaders, who are largely seen as opportunists and symbols of the secular system.

Drawing their attention to the disgrace their subjects experienced in Lagos, Ja'far used harsh language to remind Muslim leaders that they were the heirs of Usman Danfodio,⁴¹ who liberated his subjects from persecution in the 19th century. Ja'far urged them to 'publicly condemn the Lagos tragedy, and issue a one-week ultimatum to the federal government to take action or else [...] the whole country will engulf in chaos'.⁴² Ja'far then highlighted the symbolic reward the rulers would receive if they rose to the task, 'if they do this, they bring honour to themselves, their subjects, religion, and, wallahi, their prestige will increase in the eyes of their subjects and our enemies'. He continued:

But if they keep silent, while our brothers have been killed, then they do not have any worth in our eyes, and we will continue to view them as useless people (*mutanen banza*); and we will continue to see them as people wearing useless turbans. Any emir who refuses to publicly condemn this tragedy, he is worthless, take it or leave it. Any emir who does not intervene: Sultan of Sokoto, Shehu of Borno, Sarkin Kano, Sarkin Gwandu, Daura, Katsina, Zazzau, all other Muslim emirates; if they do not come out and condemn the matter, we will continue to view them as useless people, and let them not even think they will announce over the radio that the moon is sighted to start [Ramadan] fast, their word for us is insignificant; they cannot issue command to Muslims since

40 Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

41 Usman Danfodio was a Fulani cleric who led a reform mission in Hausaland that resulted in the establishment of the defunct Sokoto Caliphate in 1804. His descendants and disciples continued to rule the theocratic empire up to 1903, when it was formally disbanded by the British colonial armies who defeated the soldiers of the empire. Nonetheless, the British decided to return the traditional leadership to the families of the various emirs under the caliphate, giving rise to monarchs to the present era. For a comprehensive history of the Sokoto caliphate, see Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, Green and Co LTD, 1967).

42 Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

they are not part of them; if they are part of us, they would have represented us. They should come on behalf of their emirate councils, ... even if some are coward, there should be a courageous king who [will do] in the name of his emirate. You are not ruling a forest, you are not ruling stalls, you are ruling human beings, and it is those human beings that were disgraced. Therefore, they must come out and defend us; they must rise and represent us.⁴³

The third constituency that Ja'far addressed were the legislators in both the lower and upper chambers of the National Assembly. He appealed to them to come publicly and condemn the terrorism that was unleashed on the people they represented. Failure to do this, Ja'far warned, might snowball in the truncation of the democracy that they enjoyed.

Toward the end of the sermon, which was delivered amid crying, tears, and loud chants of 'Allahu Akbar' by the audience, Ja'far reiterated some of the points he raised earlier. He asked all Muslims to prepare and strategise as, at any moment, they could be summoned to fight. Apart from the physical preparation, Ja'far stressed that the most important and effective preparation Muslims could make was to purify their faith by clutching onto the authentic creed and promoting righteousness. Mosques should be revived and kept lively with devotion, teaching, and preaching. People should inculcate the habit of rigorous recitation of the Qur'an and prayers, both at home and in Muslim places of worship. Moreover, Muslims must refine their relationships among themselves by assisting, supporting, and loving one another. According to Ja'far, this preparation should represent two-thirds of the whole mobilisation process in the event Muslims should have to resort to a revengeful solution.

Although Ja'far earlier ridiculed the customary authorities that would be reluctant to intervene and take the lead in revenge, in his concluding comments, he stressed that it was *only the Muslim leaders; the emirs, the governors, and the scholars* who could ask Muslims to come out. For Ja'far, the impending revenge would not be led by a mob, but rather mobilised and commanded through and by the consensus of the entire Muslim leadership. Ja'far insisted that no individual, group, or any section of the Muslim community should take the law into their own hands, no matter how pained they felt. He also called on the Yoruba community in the north to issue public disclaimers and openly distance themselves from the handiwork of their kinsmen, even if merely to thwart reprisals against themselves. He ended the sermon by endorsing and upholding the decision of northern traders and drivers who imposed an embargo on the export of goods to the southwest.

Discussion

The sermon had all the elements necessary to cast Ja'far as a confrontational or even radical scholar, especially if one ignores its context and background. After all, Ja'far was an intrepid and fearless speaker who did not hesitate to call a spade by its name, even if this might sound bitter to powerful elite. Consequently, as corruption was increasingly becoming the order of the day in Nigeria,

43 Ja'far, "OPC" Friday Sermon.

Ja'far's political and religious discourses were full of public outcry, vituperative and scathing remarks against the way the country was being governed. Similarly, he had a penchant for speaking on behalf of Muslims, presenting the Muslim perspective on events involving violence, altercations between Muslims and non-Muslims, or any socio-religious phenomenon in Nigeria and even beyond, including, for example, the Palestinian plight.

The main motivating factor behind Ja'far's fiery tone in addressing political and religious leaders was the brutality and mercilessness of the Lagos massacre, which, in his view deserved every kind of verbal severity that could lead to immediate redress. After all, since a similar tragedy had occurred in the same region a year earlier, which spilled to other areas and had the tragic repercussions it had, the present episode would have been successfully averted had leaders faithfully and sincerely discharged their duties. The language applied was admittedly harsh, but in Ja'far's view, the loss of beloved Muslims and northerners deserved a strident approach or criticism against any personality if it would spark concern for justice for the victims. Ja'far's call for Muslim leaders and northern stakeholders to rise in defence of their subjects and to lead retaliatory campaigns – if needed – was meant to challenge the backing of the OPC, which elites in the southwest were alleged to champion whenever this kind of ethno-religious strife between the two regions ignited.

Ja'far warned that once Muslims resorted to revenge, the country would run into an uncontrollable chaos that would affect all other regions and ethnic groups, including innocent people. On the other hand, Ja'far's address to political leaders was meant to remind them that in the event they did not intervene and address the situation, they would be the primary losers, since these developments would put an end to civilian politics. He made this point clear when he predicted that, as things would veer out of control, the military, which Ja'far had, ironically, condemned a year earlier in a different sermon, would have to seize power to restore stability. This threat would of course ring in the ears of the political class since the Nigerian army had used similar pretexts to justify their coups, as seen throughout the political history of the country.

Ja'far delivered the sermon as an autonomous scholar who was not afraid of speaking truth to power. For him, any pain felt by a segment of Muslim society equated to a collective pain that all Muslims should feel. The OPC sermon, many Muslims would admit, positioned Ja'far as the voice of Islam: defender, custodian, and champion of Muslim interests and aspirations in northern Nigeria. This contributed to making him an iconic figure before he was even fifty years old.

Interestingly, although the tone of the sermon was fiery, and to some extent discourteous to the prestige of its targeted audience, many came to appreciate it. Furthermore, the sermon strikingly appealed to the sensibilities of the masses, who would have formed the mob that would have sought revenge.

In his turbocharged sermon, Ja'far explained how some might resort to a reprisal attack, giving specific details of how it might be carried out and positioning himself

among those on the frontline giving commands. A listener to the sermon may easily conclude that something must be done, or else the country could run into chaos. Ja'far's strategy to assure people of the possibility of revenge, but then to turn around and emphasise that the major preparation for it lay in spiritual and moral purity, was an indirect message to the people that no matter their urge for revenge, their efforts should focus on refining and enhancing religiosity, by equipping themselves with Islamic teaching and righteous deeds. After all, as I have shown elsewhere, Ja'far devoted much of his career to preaching, teaching, and sensitising Muslims to the authentic Islamic creed, improving their piety, reforming their worship, and enhancing their spirituality.⁴⁴

Ja'far handed over the entire decision-making power to northern leaders, while warning individuals and groups against taking any action. In fact, he stressed that people should remain indoors and should only come out when they heard the calls of the emirs, governors, and scholars. Ja'far's strategy of hijacking public emotion and becoming the chief agitator for justice while in the end calling on people to shun violence reflects the assertion that 'chaos has its own structures that need to be navigated',⁴⁵ as argued by Thurston. Such a discursive strategy needs to be explored further in peace and conflict resolution studies.

While the main and primary approach of reformers is largely to remain intellectual and non-confrontational, let alone violent, at times a threat of adopting radical means to solve a problem in the interest of poor, defenceless masses has a greater potential for communicating the desired message to the target recipients and concerned parties. In Nigeria and perhaps other African contexts, activists may employ a rhetoric of violence and issuing threats of bloodletting to negotiate public interest, amplify a case of oppression, protest perceived domination, or express any grievance. And in fact, this has been the language that best attracts the attention of authorities; indeed, they sometimes only respond are addressed in such a way. Ja'far's decision to resort to threatening physical violence resembles the resolve of Afa Ajura, the 20th century Muslim reformer of northern Ghana, to issue warnings that, unless the molesting and assaulting of women suspected of being witches was ended, he would ignore authorities and mobilise a counterforce to resist it and protect the defenceless women.⁴⁶

But perhaps more than Afa Ajura of Ghana, Ja'far's reform mission broadly permeated different levels of public life, manifesting in his commitment to sensitising people to remain law-abiding and mobilising them to work hard for the betterment of their lives, while insisting on the need for leaders to discharge their responsibilities. Although outside the scope of this paper, it is pertinent to note that besides championing social programmes, Ja'far had articulated ideas and thoughts that could be developed as blueprints for multiple reform efforts in

⁴⁴ Ajura and Ibrahim 2021.

⁴⁵ Thurston, Alexander 2020: 11.

⁴⁶ Ajura and Ibrahim 2021: 47–49.

the educational, socioeconomic, and political realms. On different occasions, Ja'far reckoned that inequality, uneven treatment of citizens and poor leadership both at the federal and state levels contributed significantly to worsening the relations between Muslims and Christians. Such a deficit in good governance has triggered ethno-religious crises that have marred Nigeria.⁴⁷

Ja'far shifted a major part of the blame for the Lagos massacre to leaders, who must have eventually heard about the OPC sermon. The passionate appeals the sermon channelled to the stakeholders were effective, as some of them waded into the matter. Meanwhile, Ja'far, partnered with a network of scholars and northern intellectuals and formed a team that met with the Kano State Government to discuss the issue. The team submitted its proposal for interventions and provisions of relief materials to the victims of the crisis. It also recommended the evacuation and facilitation of the safe return of those who felt at risk. The Kano State Government dispatched a high-ranking delegation headed by the deputy governor to Lagos State to assess the situation in preparation for adequate measures, including channelling assistance to the victims.

However, the most productive outcome of Ja'far's OPC sermon seems to have been its successful and effective prevention of retaliation, which would have been disproportionately tragic had influential voices like those of Ja'far not enlightened the public and controlled their emotions. The OPC sermon would remain Ja'far's harshest. Several developments occurred in the post-OPC Sermon years such as other unpunished cases of murders of Muslims and the emergence of Bola Tinubu as Nigeria's president in 2023. However, Muslims still show nostalgic reactions on social media to the days of Ja'far, whose sermons and public discourses could, as far as they are concerned, at least partly alleviate their anguish. Ja'far also delivered other sermons on crises in Nigeria like the 2004 Yelwan Shendam clashes in Plateau State, in which he discussed its causes and offered recommendations on ways to avoid future occurrences.

Although Ja'far was a rising star from the 1980s and through the 1990s, there is no doubt that the issues and sensitive themes which he discussed in his sermons such as the OPC became the driving force in earning Ja'far and the Almuntda mosque a unique popularity that could hardly be rivalled by any other scholar or Friday mosque in northern Nigeria. The mosque recorded large turnouts of congregants who came to listen to Ja'far's weekly sermons. Although the sermon usually began an hour or thereabout after noon, the mosque was full to the brim as early as 10 am. The keen interest and strong enthusiasm shown to the sermons by people of various social and institutional backgrounds including politicians, elected and traditional leaders, spies and security agents (both domestic and foreign),

but also critics conveys a certain renaissance of Islamic consciousness and activism. The OPC sermon and other speeches by the scholar made his public addresses popular and 'the most marketable Islamic religious items'.⁴⁸

One cassette vendor told me that he earned his living by trading in Ja'far's cassettes. From the 2000s through his assassination, people queued to purchase tapes of Ja'far's sermons, lessons, and lectures.

Owing to the thematic delicacy of his sermons and the general excitement they generated across Nigeria, authorities deployed surveillance to the venue of the Friday sermon and other places where Ja'far delivered public lessons. However, Ja'far's public addresses never instigated public disturbances, nor was it reported that Ja'far was interrogated by the Nigerian police. On the contrary, a few years after his death, Nigerian security forces would exploit Ja'far's sermons and distribute free CDs of his speeches to the public in a move to counter and deter people from the ideological campaigns and theological propaganda of Boko Haram, the insurrectionist group that rose and troubled the peace of northern Nigeria.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Relations between Muslims and Christians, north and south, as well as among diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, but especially between the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are chiefly characterised by mutual distrust, misunderstandings, accusations, and counter accusations on political domination and economic disempowerment. This often translates into communal violence, killings, and grave humanitarian disasters. Muslims seemingly appear to be at the receiving end during most of Nigeria's ethno-religious crises. Yet non-Muslims also have similar grievances and have stories that parallel the ordeal of their Muslim counterparts. They are in some parts of the north innocently persecuted, particularly during reprisals when tragedies like the OPC massacre occur, or in cases of allegations of blasphemy. Fingers of blame for this situation are always brandished at leaders who are shouldered with the task of administering the nation with utmost equality and justice, though they largely fail to do justice due to regional, ethnic, and religious discrimination. Although without political power, clerics such as Ja'far have more effective strategies for controlling the emotions of their followers during tensions through sermons and homilies.

Despite its controversial nature and the risk of being misinterpreted, the OPC sermon would remain one of the most sensitive and popular sermons that Ja'far had ever performed. It addressed both the leaders and the masses in a language that alerted and prodded the former to act, while assuring the latter that their plight was not wantonly ignored. The sermon reflects the complexities of a myriad of problems that bedevil coexistence among Ni-

⁴⁷ For a comprehensive list of the series of these crises from 1999 to 2009, see Erunke Canice Esidene, "Understanding the Incidence of Violence in Nigeria Democracy: An Overview Of Communal Clashes in the Fourth Republic", published by Researchgate and available on https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233762519_VIOLENCE_AND_DEMOCRATIC_SUSTENANCE_IN_NIGERIA/link/0fcfd50b52399c9719000000/download; last accessed 3 January 2022.

⁴⁸ Brigaglia 2014: 404.

⁴⁹ This information is very popular among people of Maiduguri in Borno state, the theatre of the Boko Haram insurgency. I verified it during my fieldwork in March 2019, particularly in my interviews with informants such as Bunu Mustapha (22 March 2019), Ahmad Abdulkadir (20 March 2019), Abubakar Ibrahim (22 March 2019), Ismaila Muhammad (21 March 2019), Muhammad Ibrahim Babagana (aka Malam Bana, 22 March 2019), among others.

geria's major ethno-religious groups. It can be easily deduced that, with millions of followers,⁵⁰ had Ja'far called for retaliation, the highly charged, enraged masses would certainly have responded with action. Needless to say, the situation would have been tragically chaotic. Ja'far was aware that his message would hit the right target, and he therefore saw it as necessary to refrain from instantly calling for revenge.

Unlike Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, Ja'far recognised Nigerian nationhood and accepted its sovereignty as an independent republic and amalgamated political entity that was born out of British colonial occupation. Although he had his reservations on the modus operandi of its leaders during both military and civilian regimes, he neither called for the country's disintegration nor for secession of the north in favour of a purely Islamic republic. Rather, as an Islamist, he preferred that reform – social, moral, and political – be pursued and achieved from within and in light of Nigeria's political structures. However, even if Ja'far was a moderate and peaceful scholar who led a nonviolent mission, it must be acknowledged that his effort at liberating his oppressed Muslim constituency must have earned him the wrath of some Nigerian leaders who were directly affected by his rhetorical violence. At any rate, Ja'far used his authoritative position and voice to defend Muslims, articulate a political critique, overcome tensions, and call for piety.

Be that as it may, an Islamic reawakening and scripture-oriented religiosity in the stricter sense of the term, which heightened and reached its peak in Nigeria in the last decades of the 20th century and at the turn of the 21st century, owe a great debt to the mission and career of Ja'far. The Daura-born man was a key figure in the history of Nigerian Islam, as he was indeed a religious icon and role model who inspired and groomed a generation of scholars who now form part of the clerical establishment of northern Nigeria. He will be remembered for many of his achievements and by many societies, groups and figures. But most probably, he will be remembered most through the OPC sermon.

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⁵⁰ Anonymous 2012: 42.

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