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A Geopolitical Intervention in African Religious Studies

Global Salafi and Shia Identities in the Neighbourhoods of Jos, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study of Islam in Africa is undergoing significant transformation as global geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East influence local religious landscapes. The geopolitics of religion between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran has led to a flow of people (international student mobility) and ideas (through Islamic media) from the Middle East to various parts of Africa, including northern Nigeria. The extension of Middle Eastern religious soft power on the African religious landscape has generated new trends in the study of Salafism, political Islam, religious extremism, Salafi transnational media, digital Salafism, religious conflicts, and the rise of Shiism in the region. This article reviews relevant scholarship on this subject and explores the impact of these interventions on religious identities in the Anguwan Rogo neighbourhood of Jos. By examining how these transnational Islamic ideologies shape local communities, the article highlights the complexities of religious identity formation in a context marked by both global influences and local realities. The article indicates how these global movements are appropriated, adapted, and contested within the socio-political landscape of Jos. These findings underscore the importance of understanding religious identity in Africa as a dynamic interplay between global trends and local contexts, offering new insights into new trends and developments in the academic study of religion in Africa.

Key words

Geopolitical intervention; Middle East; Nigeria; transnationalism; soft power; neighbourhood; Salafism; Shia

Introduction

Islam has been a central force in shaping the religious, cultural, political, and social landscapes of Africa for over a millennium. The academic study of Islam in Africa encompasses a wide range of topics, including the historical spread of the religion (Ware III 2014), its interaction with indigenous cultures (Østebø 2015), the role of Islamic education and scholarship (Ware

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III 2014), the influence of Sufi orders (Meservey 2021), and its transformation in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Segell 2019). This article will contribute to the broader field of study of Islam in Africa through the lens of Middle Eastern geopolitical intervention and soft power in Africa.

The geopolitics of religion involves the intersection of religious beliefs, institutions, and practices with political and geopolitical dynamics (Dijkink 2006). The geopolitics of religion between Saudi Arabia and Iran, among other factors, revolve around the Sunni-Shia divide, which has historically shaped the relations between these two major regional powers. The rivalry between the two countries reached an inflection point when the 1979 Islamic Revolution brought Shia clerics to power in Iran. This event challenged the conservative Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia and created a deep ideological and geopolitical divide in the region. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the guardian of Sunni Islam. Iran, on the other hand, portrays itself as a champion of Shia Muslims worldwide. These two oil-rich countries use religious soft power to expand their influence in the Middle East and beyond (Rabi and Mueller 2018).

To propagate their versions of Islam across the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia established the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) in Madinah, while Iran founded Al-Mustafa International University (AIU) in Madinah (Birt 2004; Banikamal and Ra'ees 2018). These global institutions sponsor students from all over the world, train them, and send them back to their respective countries to serve as *duʿāt* or Salafi/Shia missionaries in their various localities. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Iran established transnational satellite television channels—Al-Wisal TV and Al-Wilaya TV, respectively—that broadcast in multiple Muslim languages, including Hausa, the lingua franca of northern Nigeria. With the largest Muslim population in Africa, Nigeria has become a prime target for Saudi-Iran geopolitics of religion and competition. The two countries have invested heavily in Nigeria in terms of student scholarships, international broadcasting, establishing schools, and financial aid to spread Salafism and Shiism in the country.

In this article, I discuss how the geopolitical intervention by the Middle Eastern powers shapes the Islamic religious landscape in Africa. Reviewing existing literature that covers media and student mobility sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Iran in Africa, I argue that while multiple studies on Salafi-Shia identities in Africa exist, there is a lack of research on the two movements from the grassroots neighbourhood level. Drawing on my own ethnographic research, I will then discuss how the transnational flows create new Salafi and Shia identities and transform the Anguwan Rogo neighbourhood into a zone of global religious encounters where the two groups become entangled in mistrust, conflicts, and spatial contestations.

The methodology of this research combines both secondary and primary methods of data collection. In the secondary method, I explore literature related to the study of Islam in Africa. The primary method consists of interviews and participant observation in the Angwan Rogo neighbourhood. I have engaged in participant observation at the community level by visiting Salafi and Shia mosques, the residences of Shia leaders and Shia headquarters (*Markaz*), Islamic shops and religious gatherings, and I observed Salafi/Shia daily interactions. Furthermore, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews among different categories of people that include (a) Salafi and Shia imams, (b) returning students from Saudi Arabia and Iran, (c) importers and consumers of Islamic merchandise, and (d) an audience of transnational Islamic satellite channels.

Theoretical Port of Entry

In the context of globalization and increasing mobility, the concept of transnationalism has gained significant prominence. Transnationalism refers to the processes, structures, and activities that transcend national borders, highlighting the interconnectedness between

individuals, communities, and nations. This phenomenon involves the creation of social, economic, political, and cultural networks that bridge multiple countries, enabling people to maintain ties to their homeland while engaging with new societies. Transnationalism is not merely the migration of people but the continuous interaction and exchange that goes beyond geographic boundaries, influencing identities, politics, and global economies.

The term 'soft power' was introduced by Nye in the late 1980s (Nye 2002). Nye argued that nations could use alternative strategies to exert influence in the modern world, where military conflicts are increasingly seen as problematic and economic dominance can lead to resentment. According to Nye, soft power involves the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. The key elements of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policy, which, when viewed positively by others, can create favourable outcomes without the need for coercion or force that characterized hard power.

The concept of transnationalism has become increasingly significant in the study of religion, as globalization, migration, and technological advancements have transformed how religious identities, practices, and institutions operate across borders. Transnationalism refers to processes that transcend national boundaries, involving flows of people, ideas, practices, and material goods. Religion, as a highly portable and adaptable system of beliefs, has played a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining transnational connections.

Salafism and Saudi Arabia's Intervention in Africa

Saudi Arabia's promotion of Salafism in Africa can be traced back to the mid-20th century, coinciding with the oil boom of the 1970s. Several researchers (Haykel 2013; Lacroix 2011) emphasize the foundational role of establishing the Muslim World League (MWL) in 1962, a key institution in exporting Salafi ideology globally. Through the MWL and other organizations, Saudi Arabia has supported the construction of mosques, Islamic centres, and educational institutions across Africa. This effort was bolstered by the Kingdom's vast oil wealth, which allowed it to fund religious projects significantly (Commins 2006).

The geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War further shaped Saudi strategies. As noted by Kepel, Saudi Arabia sought to counteract the spread of socialism, pan-Arabism, and Shi'a influence by promoting its brand of Sunni Islam, including in African countries with strategic importance. This laid the groundwork for long-term Saudi involvement in African religious affairs (Kepel 2002).

The role of Saudi Arabia in spreading Salafism across Africa has been a subject of considerable academic scrutiny and debate. Salafism, a puritanical interpretation of Islam rooted in the teachings of the Salaf (early generations of Muslims), has gained traction in various African countries over the past few decades. Saudi Arabia's involvement in this phenomenon is often linked to its political, economic, and religious strategies aimed at countering rival ideologies, securing regional influence, and promoting its interpretation of Islam. Saudi Arabia has established numerous African Islamic schools and universities, often providing scholarships for African students to study in Saudi institutions like the Islamic University of Medina (Farquhar 2015).

Islamic University of Madina

A considerable number of studies highlight the significant role played by the Islamic University of Madina (IUM) in the dissemination of Salafism globally, particularly in Africa (Meservey 2021; Sounaye 2020; Østebø 2015; Thurston 2016; Bano and Sakurai 2015; Ahmed 2015). Established in 1961 in Saudi Arabia, the university aligns itself closely with the principles of Salafism, emphasizing the Qur'an and Sunnah as understood by pious predecessors (Salaf). The

Islamic University of Madina was founded to promote Islamic scholarship and spread Salafi tenets. Its curriculum emphasizes Islamic theology (*aqidah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Quranic sciences, guided by a strict adherence to the doctrines of prominent Salafi scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. According to al-Rasheed, the university is part of a broader Saudi strategy to establish itself as the leader of the Muslim world by exporting its version of Islamic orthodoxy (al-Rasheed 2007).

Studies indicate how the IUM's influence in Africa is facilitated through multiple channels (Meservey 2021; Sounaye 2020; Østebø 2015; Thurston 2016). African students are offered scholarships to study at the university, covering tuition, accommodation, and living expenses. These students are exposed to Salafi teachings and often return to their home countries as preachers, educators, and leaders of Islamic organizations. Umar and Woodward note that many African alumni of IUM become prominent figures in local religious communities, using their training to critique Sufi orders and syncretic practices prevalent in many African societies. The alumni of IUM form transnational networks that spread Salafism through mosques, religious centres, and educational institutions (Umar and Woodward 2020). In countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia, these networks serve as conduits for Salafi literature, media, and financial resources from Saudi Arabia (Loimeier 2011). The university supports local Islamic organizations, often providing them with books, pamphlets, and other educational materials that promote Salafi ideology. In countries like Mali and Senegal, where Sufi traditions dominate, these resources are used to challenge existing religious authorities (Haykel 2013). Numerous studies focus on how the spread of Salafism through the IUM has had both transformative and contentious effects on African Muslim communities (Meservey 2021; Layachi 2023; Farquhar 2015).

Salafi graduates often position themselves as reformers, advocating for the purification of Islamic practices. This has led to tensions with Sufi orders, which historically are deeply embedded in African culture and spirituality. According to Thurston, these tensions have occasionally escalated into violent confrontations, particularly in regions where Salafi groups seek to displace Sufi authority. The IUM's emphasis on textualism and rejection of traditional Islamic hierarchies undermines the authority of local clerics and Sufi leaders. As a result, the introduction of Salafi teachings has reshaped the religious landscape in many African countries, leading to debates over what constitutes authentic Islam (Thurston 2016; Harnischfeger 2008; Farquhar 2015).

Islamic University of Madina

Saudi Arabia's media strategy is part of its broader effort to position itself as the leader of the Muslim world. Scholars (al-Rasheed 2007; Farquhar 2015) argue that Saudi-sponsored media serve both religious and geopolitical purposes, advancing Salafism as a means to counter other Islamic traditions, such as Sufism and Shiism. Several studies have outlined the significance of Saudi-sponsored satellite television outlets like Al-Wisal TV, Africa TV, and Al-Majd TV Network in broadcasting religious programmes emphasizing Salafi theology and jurisprudence. These platforms often feature prominent Saudi scholars and aim to reach Muslim audiences in Africa. Al-Majd TV, for example, has gained popularity in Africa for its Quran-focused programming and its accessibility via affordable satellite dishes. According to Loimeier, the widespread availability of these channels has allowed Saudi Arabia to bypass local religious authorities and reach African households directly (Loimeier 2011).

Before the advent of new media and satellite broadcasting, scholarship on Salafi media focused on radio and audio cassettes (Schulz 2006 and 2012; Sounaye 2014). Radio and audio cassettes are powerful tools for reaching rural and less digitally connected African audiences. Saudi-sponsored radio programmes often air in local languages, making Salafi teachings more

accessible. These programmes frequently address the importance of monotheism (*tawhid*), the dangers of innovation (*bid'ah*) in religious practices, and the rejection of Sufi rituals. Researchers note that radio broadcasts have mainly influenced West African countries like Nigeria and Mali, where Sufi traditions are prevalent. Furthermore, some scholars analyse the active role of Saudi Arabia in distributing Salafi books, pamphlets, and magazines across Africa (Thurston 2016; Zayani 2012). These materials, often translated into local languages, are disseminated through mosques, Islamic centres, and bookstores.

With the rise of the internet, Saudi-backed Salafi content has proliferated on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Prominent Saudi scholars, such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Tarifi and Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan, have used these platforms to reach African audiences. Saudi-funded websites like Islamweb and Islamqa offer fatwas and religious guidance in multiple languages, including French and Swahili, targeting African users. The digital nature of these platforms enables Saudi media to reach younger, tech-savvy Muslims in Africa (Haykel 2013). A body of literature also investigates African Salafi engagement with new media technologies (Sanni 2022; Ibrahim 2024; Schulz 2011). This literature analyses African Salafi content creators and the construction of religious authority on digital platforms.

Saudi Arabia's media outlets have played a significant role in spreading Salafism in Africa, leveraging modern communication technologies to promote their religious ideology. While these efforts have succeeded in shaping religious discourses and practices, they have also sparked tensions with traditional Islamic authorities and contributed to socio-religious transformations across the continent.

Shiism and Iran's Intervention in Africa

Iran has established a network of religious institutions and educational centres in Africa. Iranian-sponsored seminaries train African students in Twelver Shiism and often offer scholarships to study in Qom, Iran. Studies emphasize the role of organizations such as the Al-Mustafa International University Tehran, which serves as a hub for educating African students and spreading Shiite teachings (Shahvar 2020; Dai 2018; Bano and Sakurai 2015; Segell 2019). Print media also has historically been the backbone of Shia religious outreach in Africa. Early Shia publications often translated Islamic texts from Persian and Arabic into local African languages, such as Swahili and Hausa. Publications have included translations of Shia theological texts, biographies of Shia scholars, and pamphlets promoting Shia practices. Periodicals focus on Shia doctrine, religious events, and political issues relevant to Shia Muslims, such as the struggle for religious freedom and social justice. Print media remains valuable for engaging with audiences in areas where digital access is limited, providing Shia teachings in accessible formats (Mirza 2014; Leichtman 2009).

Satellite television channels such as Al-Alam and Al-Wilaya TV provide religious and geopolitical narratives aligned with Iran's interests. Shia religious media in Africa represents an evolving domain of study at the intersection of religion, media, and geopolitics. Over the last few decades, Shia communities across Africa have developed a range of media initiatives to promote religious education, address socio-political issues, and cultivate a sense of Shia identity. The literature on Shia media in Africa examines its historical evolution, strategies, regional variations, and societal impacts. Programmes are often delivered in local languages, making Shia teachings accessible to a broad audience. Key events in the Shia calendar, such as Ashura and the birthdays of Shia Imams, are broadcast to foster a sense of community (Vahed 2022; Oxford Analytica 2024; Leichtman 2009; Mirza 2014; Ibrahim 2020).

Some studies explore Shia engagement with the new media. Digital and social media have emerged as critical tools for Shia religious outreach in Africa. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are increasingly used to share lectures, religious debates,

and visual content. The advantages of digital media for Shia outreach in Africa include the ability for Shia groups to reach younger, tech-savvy audiences who may be less inclined toward traditional media. Social media enables real-time interactions, allowing audiences to ask questions, seek guidance, and engage in discussions. Digital media helps African Shia communities stay connected with the global Shia diaspora, fostering solidarity and shared identity (Vahed 2022).

The promotion of Shia beliefs and practices has, in some cases, exacerbated sectarian tensions in regions with strong Sunni influences, particularly where Salafi or Wahhabi media portray Shiism negatively. In Nigeria, sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunni communities have been linked, in part, to the distinct media narratives promoted by each group (Ibrahim 2020). Shia media in some parts of Africa play a role in socio-political mobilization, aligning with resistance and social justice themes. For instance, Nigeria hosts one of the largest Shiite communities in Africa, primarily represented by the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky. Iranian ideology and support influenced Zakzaky's transformation from Sunni activism to Shiism. The IMN's alignment with Iran has led to tensions with the Nigerian government and Sunni groups, particularly in the context of sectarian violence (Ibrahim 2020).

There are remarkable similarities in the approaches of the two Middle Eastern nations to geopolitical interventions in Africa. The two countries shared similar strategies in terms of establishing transnational satellite televisions, international Islamic universities, international Islamic publications, and foreign aid. The main difference between the two countries is that the scale of Saudi investment in Africa far outweighs that of Iran. Probably because Saudi has more petrodollars to spend, while Iran has been hamstrung by sanctions. Furthermore, Saudi has more local partners to work with since most of the African Muslim population is Sunni. The presence of two holy mosques of Islam in Mecca and Madinah has added to the Saudi software in Africa. However, the outcomes of the interventions are fundamentally different, as they result in different religious identities and distinct community formations.

Salafi reform practices, actors, and institutions radically reconfigured the social order of northern Nigeria. Salafism has challenged the existing order by initiating new forms of social mobilization, providing an alternative moral and political order, and innovative new media practices, and issuing a fatwa on contemporary challenges (Sounaye 2020). Despite its seeming disadvantage compared to Saudi in competition for supremacy, Iran has achieved remarkable success, particularly in Nigeria. Shia has introduced new socio-religious practices such as public processions, a new burial practice, and challenging the political order.

Salafi Shia Identities in Angwan Rogo Neighbourhood

Despite the wealth of studies reviewed above, there is a significant gap in the literature analysing the impact of Saudi Arabia and Iran's geopolitical interventions at the grassroots level in Africa. In northern Nigeria, the study of Salafi-Shia in local neighbourhoods is lacking. Anguwan Rogo is one of the largest Muslim neighbourhoods in Jos, Plateau State's capital. Due to frequent ethno-religious conflicts in Jos and the resulting residential segregation between Muslims and Christians, most neighbourhoods in the city assumed a religious character (Krause 2011). In the past three decades, most of the inhabitants of Anguwan Rogo have converted to Salafism. The inhabitants refer to Anguwan Rogo as *ahlus-sunnah* territory, an idea that underpins the collective Salafi identity of the neighbourhood. The soundscape of the neighbourhood is marked by sounds of Salafi preaching and teaching emanating from dozens of mosques' loudspeakers. The smell of a special Islamic perfume, *Oud* (imported from Saudi Arabia), diffuses from mosques and Islamic shops in the neighbourhood. Salafi uses this perfume as a religious practice, or *sunnah*, because the Prophet loved and used it in his time.

As a result, the Islamic sounds and scents permeate the ambiance of the neighbourhood, creating a distinct Salafi atmosphere. Nevertheless, a Shia minority exists in the neighbourhood, and even the residence of the Shia leader (*amir*) of Plateau State and the movement's regional headquarters, or *markaz*, are located here.

International student mobility: The flow of international students from Anguwan Rogo to Saudi Arabia and Iran engendered international mobility and connectivity between the neighbourhood and the Middle East. Numerous Salafi imams and a few Shia clerics who graduated from the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and Al-Mustafa University (AIU) teach and preach in Anguwan Rogo and beyond. One of my Salafi interlocutors stated, 'After graduating from the Islamic University of Madinah, I began teaching and preaching in schools and mosques. I teach a variety of Salafi books in Jos, particularly in Anguwan Rogo, where I reside.' These former students maintain an extensive network with their colleagues in the Middle East and other parts of the world. A considerable number of students who are presently enrolled in the IUM and AIU travel back and forth between the three countries. This student mobility and network have enabled a robust flow and exchange of knowledge, ideas, and cultures, contributing to a greater interconnection between Anguwan Rogo and the Middle East.

Transnational satellite television channels: Most Salafi and Shia in Angwan Rogo are active consumers of Al-Wilaya TV Hausa and Al-Wisal TV Hausa, broadcast from Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. The programmes on these channels are broadcast by northern Nigerian students studying at the IUM and AIU. Some programmes are produced in studios in Nigeria or recorded teaching, preaching, and Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafseer*) by Salafi leaders and shipped to the channels for broadcasting. My interlocutors told me that these channels are sources of religious pedagogy, spiritual nourishment, and ideological guidance for them. These channels provide a seamless flow of religious ideas, build and solidify religious identities, and shape Salafi-Shia micro-level interactions and relationships. People from Anguwan Rogo participate in the live programmes of these channels by asking questions and commenting through phone calls, SMS that appear on the screens, and social media pages of the channels. Many people I interacted with in the neighbourhood are active consumers of and participants in Salafi and Shia social media.

Domesticating Salafism: The Flow of Islamic Products

Various Islamic goods flow from Saudi Arabia and Iran to northern Nigeria and Anguwan Rogo in particular. Multiple Islamic shops that sell Islamic goods exist on the neighbourhood's streets. These goods range from Salafi canon books, magazines, DVD plates, Middle Eastern dry fruit such as dates, Islamic clothes, Islamic medicine (also known as 'Tibb-e-Nabawi' or Prophetic Medicine), body care products, spiritual care products, and homemaking products. The most important ingredients of Islamic medicine are honey, black seed (*habbatus sauda*), Zamzam sacred water, and fenugreek powder (*hulba*). Honey and black seeds hold a prominent position in Islamic medicine. My Salafi interlocutors told me that the Prophet highly recommended the use of Zamzam, honey, and black seeds for various ailments. Salafism's emphasis on adherence to early Islamic practices may impact the acceptance and utilization of Islamic medicine within Salafi communities, shaping healthcare choices and perspectives on healing.

Body Care Products: Islamic shops sell a variety of body care products imported from the Middle East, particularly for women. These products include soaps, perfumes, supplements, and herbal teas. The products have inadvertently generated various practices, rituals, and beliefs related to grooming practices, hygiene, adornment, and medical treatments in the neighbourhood.

Spiritual Care Products: What I call spiritual care products are Zamzam and packaged prayer water. Zamzam is an underground water source within the holy mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It holds significant religious and cultural importance for Muslims around the world. Prayer water is prayed upon and packaged as a cure for different afflictions such as demon possession or magic. The practice of producing and selling prayer water is a new practice developed by Salafis in northern Nigeria, and it is a radical shift that has enchanted Salafi practices in the country. People in Angwan Rogo use the Zamzam and prayer water by either drinking it or rubbing it on their bodies as cures or prevention for various ailments and psychological distress. This practice indicates domesticating Salafism, a situation where Salafism is adapted to accommodate local needs. This situation resonates with Østebø's (2015) analysis of Salafism in Ethiopia, which explores how the global Salafi movement has been adapted and localized within the Ethiopian context. In this vein, Appadurai (1996) highlights that domestic space is a site of intimacy and everyday practices, where culture is both embodied and transmitted.

Homemaking Products: What I call homemaking products are different kinds of Islamic calligraphies and incense that are sold in Islamic shops. The calligraphic images used are mostly the words 'Allah' and 'Muhammad', which come with exquisite designs that appear in sparkling colours and are sometimes adorned with intricate arrangements of flowers. My interlocutors told me that they use calligraphies as aesthetic objects to beautify their homes and for spiritual purposes as reminders of transcendence. My interlocutors also believe that hanging Islamic calligraphy on walls purifies the atmosphere of their homes and expels evil spirits in the vicinity. Burning incense has recently developed into a homemaking ritual perceived to be a good Islamic ethical practice. The use of Islamic calligraphies and burning incense has become a mechanism of how Salafis express religious identity and values through their domestic spaces.

Furthermore, tuning in to Salafi and Shia television channels is also part of the homemaking practices that domesticate Sunni and Shia in the neighbourhoods. Television has become an indispensable part of modern homemaking, influencing various aspects of domestic life. As a source of entertainment, a tool for family bonding, an instrument for information dissemination, and a vehicle for shaping cultural and religious identity, television occupies a central position in the home. Salafi and Shia television channels facilitate shared experiences and interactions among family members and contribute to the broader religious socialization and cultural formation of individuals. These Islamic channels have become an integral part of the fabric of homemaking in the neighbourhood, reflecting and shaping the Salafi and Shia values, identities, and relationships that define the home as a space of belonging and connection.

Branding sunna products: I conceive the Salafi products described above as *sunnah* brands. This is because consuming the products is often cast as participating in the *sunnah* of the Prophet. Branding, in a general sense, refers to a process of creating a unique identity, image, and perception for a product, service, organization, or individual in the minds of consumers. Effective branding aims to evoke specific emotions, associations, and values that resonate with consumers, fostering loyalty, trust, and preference. Consumption of these *sunnah* brands and various mosque programmes via loudspeakers are new Salafi practices of body making, homemaking, and neighbourhood making. Combined, these practices Salafize the Anggwan Rogo neighbourhood. They also globalized the neighbourhood because the *sunnah* products are imported from the Middle East, and some of the practices are inspired and transmitted through various Salafi international media and networking. Furthermore, *sunnah* products are a means of self-expression and affiliation with Salafi social groups and lifestyles. The brands also contribute to how Salafis negotiate their identities through consumption.

Shia Merchandise: Though the Shia do not have such shops, they nevertheless import books, magazines, and images of Shia imams to display and sell during mass religious events. Through the daily consumption of these commodities, Salafism and Shiism have become part of the everyday life and lived experiences of the residents. The consumption of the products also indicates how the everyday lives of Salafi individuals and their sense of identity are inextricably interlinked with the products imported from the Middle East.

Salafi-Shia relations: The sense of Angwan Rogo as a Salafi neighbourhood has been constantly challenged by the presence of Shia minorities in the area. The regular conspicuous spatial practices of Shia, such as the Ashura procession, coupled with the Sunni perception of them as a heretic sect, make their public visibility threatening to the perceived normalized spatial configuration of the neighbourhood (Ibrahim 2020). This sense of threat led to a violent attack on Shia in 2016 during the Ashura procession in the neighbourhood, which resulted in fatal casualties and destruction of their houses and headquarters (Bere 2016). This incident is connected with national politics, as the Nigerian government often uses overwhelming force to suppress Shia activities in the public realm. The Shia national leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, has been detained in prison for almost a decade. This conflictual Salafi-Shia relationship reflects and interconnects with transnational politics as the government of Saudi Arabia supports, while Iran opposes, Nigeria in suppressing Shiism. Iran also advocates for the release of Sheikh Zakzaky. Due to the clout of Saudi soft power, the Nigerian government sided with the Salafi against the Shia.

In January 2024, in the early phase of the war in Gaza, the government of Iran organized an international conference in Tehran, inviting Islamic scholars from different parts of the world to discuss the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. One of the foremost Salafi scholars, Sheikh Ahmad, was invited and attended the conference. When he returned to Nigeria, Sheikh Gumi commented positively about his visit and his impression of Iran. He even stated that he salutes Iran for their support of Palestinians in Gaza, a feat that all the Arab countries failed to do, including Saudi Arabia. These comments about Iran by Sheikh Gumi have unleashed a cascade of vitriol from Salafi imams throughout northern Nigeria. Salafi imams accused Gumi of criticizing the government of Saudi Arabia for not respecting Islamic scholars. One imam in Angwan Rogo stated that Sheikh Gumi had betrayed his father, who was well respected in Saudi Arabia. He continued that Iran was trying to recruit him into Shiism and use him as another tool for spreading Shia in the region.

This incident revealed how the Middle Eastern geopolitics of religion and soft power wielded by Iran and Saudi Arabia became intricately entangled with the religious politics of northern Nigeria. The emergence of Salafi and Shia identities in the region was the result of the geopolitical intervention and the wielding of soft power by these Middle Eastern powers. Most of the disputes between the two communities are ultimately linked to Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The forces of global geopolitics of religion described above have combined to inspire new sets of relationships, discourses, knowledge, lived experiences, and practices that globalize everyday religious life in the Anguwan Rogo neighbourhood. This series of transnational interconnections makes the contemporary Salafi and Shia identities part and parcel of Middle Eastern geopolitics of religion.

Conclusion

Iran's African outreach is often viewed through the lens of its rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Both countries invest heavily in religious diplomacy, with Saudi Arabia promoting Sunni Islam, particularly its Wahhabi strand, as a counter to Iranian Shiism. The role of Saudi Arabia in spreading Salafism in Africa is multifaceted, reflecting a combination of religious, political, and economic motives. While Saudi initiatives have contributed to the expansion of Salafi

practices and institutions, they have also sparked debates about their implications for local religious traditions and social stability. Future research should aim to disentangle the complex interactions between external influences and local dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of Salafism's evolution in Africa.

Iran's promotion of Shiism in Africa reflects a multifaceted strategy combining religious outreach, cultural engagement, and geopolitical manoeuvring. While its efforts have yielded notable successes, particularly in countries like Nigeria, they have also sparked resistance and deepened sectarian divides. Further research is needed to assess the evolving dynamics of Iran's African policy and its implications for regional and global politics. The literature identifies a key consequence of Iran's promotion of Shiism as the exacerbation of sectarian divides. This is particularly evident in regions with strong Salafi or Wahhabi influences, where anti-Shiite rhetoric has intensified in response to Iran's activities. Despite growing interest in this topic, several gaps exist, particularly in comparative analyses. There is a lack of comparative research examining Iran's promotion of Shiism in Africa relative to other regions, such as South Asia or the Middle East. Ultimately, this article underlines the need for a further, expanded, and more critical exploration of Saudi Arabia and Iran's intervention from the neighbourhood level as an important dimension of the contemporary shifts in the religious landscape in Africa.

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