
The Islamic Approach to Social Welfare in Muslim Societies and the Role of Social Relations: Challenges for Muslim Societies in Africa

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Abstract

The topic of Muslim social welfare is a neglected research area although recently becoming interesting especially in the social sciences and in the field of Islamic economics, but to Islam, it is as old as the religion. In fact, the major product of Muslim social welfare that is, *zakāt* (obligatory alms-giving) and one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam and *sadaqa* (voluntary charity) had been the umbrella root catering for the welfare of the “needy” in the society. Charity in Islam is not restricted to material things but also includes moral charity. This paper examines the holistic nature of the Muslim social welfare and the role it plays in Muslim societies and how this has often lead to establishing social relations among Muslims, which is expressed in their daily social interactions. Of recent, the world have identified social welfare with the United Nations and other western agencies in the developed countries, who direct humanitarian aid to especially the less privilege countries in Africa through the popular activity of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that are catering for the distressed in the low income countries in Africa and Asia. Through this effort, the West has been able to identify itself as the most compassionate, developed and caring human society, virtues that are today identified only with the twentieth-first century modern world. Rather than provision of social assistance from a distance, this paper argues that Islam introduces and encourages social welfare and charity in not only financial terms but also moral from within as basis of human social existence.

Introduction

The world is today witnessing the era of the provision of social welfare services at state, semi-state and organizational level. The high income countries (i.e. the west) is identified with strong state social welfare system that has succeeded in changing the life of its citizens, which constantly attract many Africans, Asians etc, while the rest of the world lags behind except for

few Asian countries. Africa is far lagging, suffering from decades of under development consequently, NGOs from the high income countries sometimes try to fill the gap in different areas of human needs; health, education, water supply, provision of food etc, in order to augment government effort and sometimes its failure. While on the other hand, social welfare is not new to Islam and has been in practice for centuries in many Muslim societies. Apart from prayers, there is no responsibility that the Glorious Qur'an passionately addresses many times like the issue of charity (Okenwa, 28). The Islamic state is mandated to cater for the overall wellbeing of its citizens by providing proper welfare package in which the needs of all citizens and their social and economic wellbeing will be adequately considered by the state otherwise the rulers of the state will be accountable before Allah, except where the state is economically weak and its rulers are not lavishing in public wealth, but also affected by the economic strain (Weiss, 11). The wealth of the entire state and the wealth in the hands of individuals all belongs to the original owner that is, Allah and He has instructed that part of it be spent on His creatures in the form of *zakāt*, *sadaqa* and charity etc. In Islam, Allah is the overall owner of wealth and man has only the secondary ownership and trust which is surrounded with several terms and conditions of usage. The Qur'an stressed that wealth is consequently a trust, which God entrusted on every "wealthy" person therefore; the usage of the wealth must be utilized accordingly with the rules laid down by the original owner, e.g. not having dealings in alcoholic drinks, gambling, hoarding, cheating, bribery or harmful drugs (Q:). But to use the wealth in a good way by giving it to people who lack in order to ease suffering in society. In this way, social problems will be limited in society and harmonious atmosphere of understanding will be created among different people (Senturk, 47).

Islam enjoins obligatory and voluntary concerns for the wellbeing of partners, parent-child, among neighbours and between citizens at large, sharing is therefore very essential in Islam. The head of a family is conditioned to provide food, shelter, clothing, protection as well as health care for the entire family. In a hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim, the Prophet (p) emphasized that every person is a care-taker and everyone will be questioned concerning persons/animals under his/her care. Apart from obligatory aspects of giving, the voluntary aspects encourages Muslims to assist their fellow neighbours and other members of the society by making sure that one does not feed while his/her neighbour spend the night with empty stomach or one lavish in riches while his/her neighbour lives in absolute poverty and needs.

When the state stand-up to its responsibility towards the citizenry and every individual meet-

up with what he/she is required, the society becomes a better place to live. This gesture extends to non-Muslim when they live among Muslims, they should benefit from *zakāt* (obligatory alms giving), *sadaqa* (voluntary giving) and other charitable giving by the Muslims. Omar Senturk (2007) states that: “It is a well-known fact that Caliph Umar [second Muslim caliph] had even allotted a salary from the [Muslim] treasury for an aged non-Muslim lady. Concurrently, this sort of benevolence is necessitated by the teachings [that] Islam promulgates in the name of humanity” (141). The meaning of social welfare or charity in Islam goes beyond giving of material things but also includes moral responsibility like repairing pot-holes on the road, offering water to thirsty travellers, putting a smile on a person's face or assisting one another where possible.

The Situation of Islamic Social Welfare in Muslim Societies Today

The Islamic social welfare goes hand-in-hand with the spiritual needs of the Muslim society and as the society required social amenities to survive, so also it requires faith to move on. In fact, shortage of faith is more dangerous than shortage of food (Seesemann, 103). In order to make double achievements in life, Muslim social welfare is based on the regulations of the *shari'a* (i.e. faith), to guide individual Muslims to achieving social benefits in this world as well as spiritual benefits in the hereafter. Unfortunately, Muslims today have not been able to establish the kind of *shari'a* that will bring about that appealing Islamic social benefit in Muslim societies in its true sense. The cases of some Muslim countries are evidence to this failure; Sudan, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan etc have not been able to introduce a beguiling social benefiting system that will elevate the standard of life of their people. The failure in these countries have only succeeded in attracting criticisms from especially the western countries where some scholars argue that Muslims constantly live outside the circle of 'ideal versus reality' of their religion because the reality of their life always goes contrary to the ideals of Islam (Vikor, 83). To take this further, even Islamists movements around the world have not been able to establish that Islamic social welfare system which was documented in Muslim history either due to insincerity of purpose, lack of expertise in social issues, corruption or lack of adequate understanding of the economic entanglements of the modern world. For example, Rudiger Seesemann (2014) stressed that: “Clearly, Islamists make use of their social welfare activities in order to further their personal, political and even military goals” (103), not to render genuine social services to their own communities.

The Muslims today have access to the huge knowledge of the social benefits sustained among

the early Muslims (of both theory and practice of the past pious Muslims) over many centuries of the Muslim history and also analysis of contemporary Muslim thinkers/scholars on Islamic social welfare, an example is a book written by the prominent Egyptian thinker and member of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement Sayyid Qutb. His book *al-adāla al-ijtimā'iyya fil Islam* (Social Justice in Islam) is widely read among Muslims scholars and even among non-Muslims. Qutb stressed that the practical problem of Islamic social welfare today is therefore not from Islam but from the Muslims themselves since they have what it takes to establish an Islamic social welfare system either in Muslim majority states or in various Muslim societies around the globe (124). The many records in the hands of the Muslims today indicated how Muslims in the past either as individuals, groups or as leaders practically contributed to the wellbeing of their respective societies. The stories of the four guided caliphs is a clear example including that of Umar bin Abdulaziz. The tenth-century Muslim historian al-Tabari reported that one of the famous Muslim caliphs, Umar ibn Abdu-Aziz (d. 720) instructed as in D. S. Powers (1989):

Establish inns (*Khanat*) in your lands so that whenever a Muslim passes by, you will put him up for a day and a night and take care of his animals; if he is sick, provide him with hospitality for two days and two nights; and if he has used up all of his provisions and is unable to continue, supply him with whatever he needs to reach his hometown (94).

While Amy Singer (2008) describes what a French scholar wrote about the attitude of some Muslims during the Ottoman Empire:

You find poor people who have nothing to give who understand that offering help to people consist not only of food and drink, but all kinds of needs: some spend their lifetime repairing bad roads by bringing stones, wood, filling holes and improving their surfaces; others arrange the course of streams and water sources, bringing water to the roads; and some dig wells, or bring water to the road in a shed of some sort, and there invite [passersby] to drink with such enthusiasm ... (67–68).

One is tempted to ask; what went wrong today? This is because the impact of the lack of compliance with the proper Islamic social welfare is felt in most Muslim societies today especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, which could be seen in the way that many young people (Muslims) beg on the street either as homeless or *almajirai* (students of local Qur'anic school, sing.: *almajiri*) etcetera. This had become very popular in Niger, Nigeria, Republic of Chad, Sudan etcetera (Seesemann, 106). Children who have been neglected by their parents or are

orphan at tender age have no option but to roam the street in search of survival. Young children are forced to hawk on our streets (forced labour) and sometimes to even feed their families by hawking, mostly due to the poverty situation of their parents. Widows/divorcees that have no education or job opportunity had to depend on their parents (i.e. if the parents can provide), conduct petty home trading, and beg relatives for assistance or in worst situation prostitute in order to feed. People with natural disabilities had to also beg on the street to meet-up their needs, and this had become rampant in most Muslim communities in Africa. Surveying the conditions of living of the disabled at *Layin Makafi* (blind people's quarters) in Jos Nigeria, their welfare seems awful. Begging seems their only dependable means of survival, although some of them have turned it into a luxurious means of acquiring wealth and even purchases houses and cars, which they rent out. In Ghana for instance, begging is also common in Muslim quarters and it usually reaches its peak on Fridays, this can be easily noticed in all Friday mosques especially in the *Zongo* area (Weiss, 78). Many Muslim societies in Africa do not have good means of water supply therefore had to rely on unhealthy water delivery, which increases the possibility of various kinds of contagious diseases in the community. Schools are not properly and professionally taking care of therefore, the quality of both religious and modern education have dropped or non-realizable rendering Muslim communities backward. Many Muslim graduates could not reach the university level either because of the kind of Arabic oriented *madrasa* (traditional Islamic school) they attended or could not get employment after graduation. Lastly, lack of modern initiatives in many Muslim societies has contributed to the economic decay that affects the issue of the Muslim social welfare.

Although there are individual efforts to address the problem of social welfare in Muslim societies in Africa but most of these efforts are either by individuals or Islamic groups, which are not encompassing. Examples are the social rehabilitation program established by a Sufi Sheikh Ibrahim Sidi in Sudan (Seesemann, 105), and the effort of the Izala group in Nigeria (*Izalat al-bid'a wa ikamat as-sunna*) to provide welfare to some of its members especially through the insufficient annual *zakāt* distributions.

In general, *zakāt* is often distributed by "wealthy" Muslims in Jos, Nigeria and in other Muslim societies to augment the economic situation of fellow "poor" Muslims in order to reduce their suffering apart from the regular act of giving *sadaqa* and charity in one way or the other (Abubakar, 128). However, the distribution of *zakāt* is very scanty, unorganized and lopsided therefore less effective. For the Muslim social welfare to be effective there must be a collective effort on the side of the Muslims which depends largely on the unity of the Muslims in various

communities in Africa and the understanding of the requirements of the modern world. Otherwise, the problem of poverty, lack of meaningful education and human development as well as the problem of unemployment will continue to hunt the Muslim societies in Africa. Therefore, the presence of beggars and *almajirai* on the street, orphans and helpless widows as well as the inability to deal with the various social and economic challenges will always portray the Muslim society as a community that has not been able to reconnect with its past nor become relevance with the present and has not adequate plan for the future. Because the provision of social welfare today is the key to any societal development and lack of it represent the causes of so many economic and social challenges as well as the problem of crime and immorality. The social disorganization theory stressed that: “disorganization is manifest in such things as poverty, political corruption, vice, and crime. Recent work indicates that poverty, in particular, is central to the notion of social disorganization” (Lauer and Lauer, 13). Muslims in Africa are often divided along the lines of doctrinal differences not ethnic, and this division has kept different groups independent and hostile to one another. Therefore, in order to maintain these divisions among various Islamic groups, the struggle to propagate group ideology and to gain more followers achieve more permanence. This have for many decades become the highest challenge for the survival of Islamic groups resulting in the neglect of many aspects of the Muslim community social welfare(Mumuni, 143).

Zakāt/Sadaqa and Voluntary Gifts

The Holy Qur'an and Hadith of the Noble Prophet (p) are full of various instructions to give what Allah has endowed a Muslim whether wealth, knowledge, wisdom, as well as providing a helping hand to another person or even the ability to put smile on another person's face. These attitudes make giving a central aspect of the Muslim religion. Surprisingly, there is limited research regarding the role of giving in Islam, and its impact in different Muslim societies. I have provided analysis of the impact of the compulsory and voluntary giving in Islam under the heading; 'social relations/interactions' below. There are various kinds of compulsory giving in Islam. A person is obligated to be responsible for his/her *usul* (origin and progeny) that is, one's parents, wife(s) and children, which exclude the *furu* (i.e. other relatives). Having enough beyond the responsibility of one's parents, wife(s) and children, it is encourage but optional to give to one's relatives (Senturk, 141). This kind of obligation is what I refer to as internal social obligation, which does not take into account the surplus that a person might have; therefore, one does not need a *nisāb* of *zakāt* to take care of his/her parents, wife(or wives) or children because providing for them is his primary responsibility. On the other hand,

the external social obligation is the obligation of *zakāt*, which although compulsory but does not allow a person to distribute within the circle of his primary dependents, i.e. those in his internal social obligation. Another restriction to the obligation of *zakāt* is that, it is only obligated on those that have surplus referring to *nisāb* (limit of wealth).

Literally, *zakāt* means to profit, purify or increase as well as protect, by implication, giving *zakāt* purify and increases one's wealth as well as protects it against at least spiritual disaster. According to *fiqh az-Zakāt* of Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1999), *zakāt* is an important component not only of Islamic worship but also of the socio-financial system of Islam. This dual status of *zakāt* enabled Muslim scholars in the past to analyze its details from different perspectives; *fiqh*, economic and social, but contemporary issues have emerged which require fresh, multi-layered, and nuanced scholarly analysis (Al-Qaradawi, 421).

Zakāt is not only an obligation at will but also third of the five pillars of Islam that makes a Muslim, Muslim without which his/her Islam is not complete. The second level of this assumption is that the more economic status one achieved, the more benefit for the members of his/her community. That makes both the internal and external social obligations an important part of the social responsibility to society beyond the individual unlike prayer whose spiritual benefits are mostly for the individual. According to Amy Singer (2008):

Zakāt has important social implications for the community, even though its most specific definition and realization are religious and focused on the individual and on God. Whether one believes that the original intention was a radical recirculation of wealth or a conservative gesture of assistance, *zakāt* was one means to sustain the poor and needy members of the community. It provided a mechanism for collecting and redistributing wealth and obliged Muslims to acknowledge a responsibility for other members of their confessional group (38).

There are other voluntary aspects of giving that Islam encourages in society which fosters unity and redistribute wealth among the people. One of such voluntary giving is *sadaqa*. Al-Gazali stressed in his book, *Kitāb Asrār al-Zakāt* (mysteries of almsgiving) that: “a single *sadaqa* closes seventy gates of evil.” The word *sadaqa* according to Omar Faruk Senturk (2007) means truth; acceptance and agreement while its in-depth meaning include extreme kindness and benevolence towards the 'other' (4). Although *sadaqa* is sometimes being used in place of *zakāt* in the Qur'an, but never has *zakāt* being complicated with *sadaqa*, meaning they are two different things in the Islamic *shari'a*. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1999) maintained that:

The root *sidq* has several derivatives. The verb *sadaqa* with respect to statements

means to accept and to realize. The verb *tasaddaqa* with respect to funds means gave away, realizing his faith by action. And the verb *sadaqa* means to give dowry in marriage to women. The meaning of *sadaqah* is derived from the root *sidq* because *sadaqah* implies giving away goods and funds for the sake of God in expression of faithfulness and in realization of the belief in resurrection and afterlife. It is for that reason that Qur'an associated giving with affirmation of faith and withholding with rejection of faith, God (s) says, "so he who gives in charity and fears God and in all sincerity testifies to the best, we will indeed make smooth for him the path to bliss, but he who is a greedy miser and thinks himself-sufficient and gives lies to the best we will indeed make smooth for him the path to misery (xli).

A Qur'anic verse in *Suratul Baqar* vividly captured my attention when I was writing this piece, where Allah said: "whatever good thing you spend, it is for your own soul and you shall do so for God's sake. And whatever good you spend, it will be repaid to you in full and you will not be wrong. And whatever good things you spend, surely God knows them well" (Q: 2: 272 – 273). Spending at wish and for the sake of Allah have become a characteristic aspect of being a good Muslim and in order to encourage that, Islam diverse abundant means for Muslims to give out. *Zakāt al-fitr* (charity of fast breaking) for instance, requires every healthy, well-to-do Muslim to give to the "needy" and "poor" in society his/her usual annual food in order for them to comfortably celebrate the *eid*. *Aqiqa* (sacrifice offered in celebration and gratitude for a newborn child), is another gesture to the "poor", where an animal is sacrifice and part of the meat is distributed to the "poor" while part of it is given to family members, friends and neighbours (Senturk, 147). On receiving notice of the newborn baby, family members, friends, and neighbours contribute baby clothes, fabric for the mother (or *mai-jego* in Hausa societies) and other items to the parents especially the mother on the seventh day as a gift for the honour of having a baby. In fact, such gifts indebted the receiver to reciprocate in another turn of the event, and refusing to reciprocate is refusing friendship (Abubakar, 126). Food is provided to guest during marriage *walima* (wedding feast) and whoever eats the food is expected to pray and seek blessings for the new married couples. Popular prayer among the Hausa in Jos is: "*Allah ya bada zaman lafiya/hakuri* (i.e. may Allah give you the ability of being patience with one another), which is funny but taken seriously by wise elders and popular blessings sought from the marriage is: "*Allah ya bada ciki da goyo*" (may Allah bless the marriage with children). *Eid al-fitr* (Muslim festival associated with celebrating the Ramadan fast) is a period for distributing food to neighbours and extended family members

while during *eid al-adha* (Muslim festival associated with animal sacrifice) the “poor” and extended family members benefit from meat sacrifice (Abubakar, 127).

People who accumulated immense wealth could dedicate certain percentage of their wealth to a “poor” neighbour, extended family member, an adopted child or a friend as a support. Islamic endowment (*waqf*, plural: *awqaf*) is today virtually present in many Muslim societies where some Muslims dedicate part of their wealth for a pious goal. Usually, the donor dedicates part of his/her wealth/property for the use of the general public (Kogelmann, 68). The endowment could be a portion of wealth, portion of land, garden, park, a mosque where Muslims could pray, or a school where Muslims (adults or children) could have a subsidized means of knowledge. Once endowment is done, the property comes under the right of God (*haqq Allah*) (68).

Compensations and fines to be given to the “poor” are imposed by the *shari’a* on those who as part of human nature commit occasional discrepancies, including fines for arbitrary annulment of fasting, violating a vow, illegalities pertaining pilgrimage or compensation for mistakenly killing someone. All these indicate that Islamic tenets are aimed at solving the problem of destitution in society while upholding the dignity of the “poor” as well as providing welfare for the “needy” in society (Senturk, 147).

Kindness and other virtues as charity

The concept of charity in Islam have contributed immensely to Muslim social welfare however, the notion of charity in Islam is not restricted to giving material possession because the wellbeing of the society do not solely depends on the interaction of giving and receiving of material things. A hadith of the Prophet (p) in Sahih Bukhari narrated a conversation between the Prophet (p) and his *sahaba* (Prophet's companions):

The Prophet said: “Every Muslim has to give in charity.”

The *sahaba* asked: “O Allah's Prophet! If someone has nothing to give, what will he do?”

He said: “He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity [i.e. from what he earns].”

The *sahaba* further asked: “If he cannot do even that?”

He replied: “He should help the needy [physically] who appeal for help.”

Then the *sahaba* asked: “If he cannot do that?”

He replied: “Then he should perform good [deed] and keep away from evil and this will be regarded as charitable” (Bukhari and Muslim).

When some individuals in the society give away their possessions and others received, when some individuals in society who do not have material things to give away, instead engage in physical assistance to other members of the society or contribute to the wellbeing of the society by repairing roads or controlling traffic etc, welfare is established. At the same time, some individuals refrain from harming other members of the society as a gesture of charity; the society becomes a better place for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In yet another understanding of charity, a prophetic hadith indicated that even putting a smile on another person's face is a charity for the Muslim and in another hadith, it is pointed out that removing anything that might possibly harm another person on the street, is the lowest level of faith that a Muslim can attain. These indicate a close link between charity, morality and spirituality in the Muslim faith. Therefore, the actions of a Muslim in this regard, whether during giving, or assisting another person or when refraining from harming another person, must be done to please God. By implication, a Muslim who does *khair* or *ma'aruf* (good deed) should not expect any social reciprocity or benefit from another person except reward from God. But then, reciprocity is part of the social life of humans, therefore, it naturally evolve between individuals in the society. In this sense, the society will continue to move forward and benefit from the pious good act of every member of the society and since reward for good deeds are never elapsing, efforts of individuals will continue until death. This does not mean that the action of individuals do not produce social results/benefits, it does and will continue to show in relationships. The following section provided analysis of the kind of social benefits that are derived from the action of individuals in Muslim society, which also contribute to social welfare. Social relationships are the essence of social cohesion among individuals.

Social Relationships/Interactions

An important aspect of societal life is embedded in the way human beings interact and benefit with one another through giving, receiving and reciprocating. Exchange of material and immaterial things or gesture is defined as vehicle of social obligation that binds people of same or different religion, culture, race or ethnicity either temporarily, e.g. in economic transaction or permanently in a circle of friendliness or subordination (Sherry, 157). Giving and receiving generally tightens social relationships between individuals and that explains the day-to-day affairs of any society as well as the societal social outlook. Giving create and recreates relationship among members of the society and defines how certain people are bound to each other in faith circle, family connection or friendship (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 8).

Therefore, when Muslims give material gift or charity to one another or smile at another person, or even render help, repair road, give water to stressful travellers, they contributed to social welfare and the building of social relationships in the society. The giver serves as an important motivator of the relationship; his/her reward is therefore enormous. Giving always motivates response whether social or moral in such a way that link is established between two or more people in society. In other words, the established link reaffirms relationship between the giver and beneficiary, which ease tension in society (Abubakar, 37). The notion of Islamic social welfare has the power of connecting people in a society in social complexity. Therefore, the giving of material or moral charity brings abundant reward from God, and it also creates social relationships in society and bind people together. The combination of these factors makes the issue of Islamic social welfare an important aspect for consideration by researchers in Muslim societies.

Conclusion

Social welfare is today a serious challenge facing almost all Muslim societies in Africa despite the presence of many Islamic groups and Muslim NGOs. Africa have recently become the boiling point of religion including the presence of many radical Islamists groups, but this have not in any case reduce the issue of poverty nor improve life in the continent. Poverty and disease has since made Africa a home for which many intervention constantly come from the West aiming to improve the living standard of the people. This challenged the Muslims to reinvent their notion of Islamic social welfare in the different Muslim communities and even extend it to non-Muslim communities not only to reconnect with the Muslim past but to gain control of their immediate environment and to escape from blame of idealizing concepts and not living up to it. Although there are many efforts by individual Muslims and some Islamic groups, but the situation call for a more united endeavour from within. Here Muslims have the home-based advantage in Africa and might not be face with the criticisms which sometimes international NGOs face of spending lots of money in the administrative processes of their organizations rather than channeling it to improving the lives of the less privilege in societies where they work. Muslim understanding of charity work well with the situation of Africa, since charity is not limited to giving but also includes good-will, moral support, and aid ot the helpless. “Poor” people can therefore provide enormous amount of intervention to one another as the situation may require.

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