

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF THE SOCIAL IDENTITY COMPLEXITY OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD*

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ABSTRACT

Using the framework of Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) as developed by Roccas and Brewer (2002), this interdisciplinary study examines the social identity complexity (SIC) of the Prophet Muhammad. Situated in a broader research agenda of mitigating ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria through high SIC, the paper describes how Muhammad's multiple and intersecting social identities—as represented in selected Qur'anic and Hadith sources—can serve as a model for promoting high social identity complexity, thereby fostering tolerance and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. By analysing Muhammad's personhood, prophethood, prominence as the prototype of the Islamic ingroup, his ethnic, racial, and national identity, and his relationship with some of the non-Muslim outgroups (e.g., Jews and Christians), the study describes a high social identity complexity that can inspire tolerance and mutual co-existence between Christians and Muslims. By highlighting the inclusive, integrative dimensions of Prophet Muhammad's social identity, the study proposes a model of high SIC that holds promise for contemporary interreligious peacebuilding, especially in the context of persistent Christian-Muslim conflicts in Northern Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Ethno-religious, Violence, Tolerance, Social Identity, and Peace.

INTRODUCTION

Situated within the broader context of a research project on the role of social identity complexity in ethno-religious violence and the role it can play in peacebuilding in the context of incessant ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria, I am researching the social identity complexity of the most revered 'human' religious figures in Christianity and Islam – Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to describe the social identity complexity of Prophet Muhammad, alongside a similar paper that describes the social identity complexity of Jesus Christ. The goal is to present Jesus Christ from the Christian side and Prophet Muhammad

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from the Islamic side as resources for promoting high social identity complexity, which can contribute to mutual understanding, tolerance, and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims.

METHODOLOGICAL DIFFICULTY AND CLARIFICATION

One difficulty common to the study of the social identity of Jesus and Muhammad¹ is that of the source of the information. Social identity refers to one's subjective perception of self in relation to others. However, most of what we have as sources of information about who Jesus and Muhammad thought they were, respectively, in terms of their social identities, are narrated sources. Hence, it seems inadequate to study the social identity complexity of a person based on what others say he or she is rather than who the person says he or she is. In the case of Jesus and Muhammad, the sources we have are either those that have been recounted by their respective followers (e.g., the Gospels for Jesus and the Hadith for Muhammad, respectively) or that which is reported as what God himself has revealed to them about who they are (e.g., Muhammad in the Qur'an).

Nevertheless, since Jesus' disciples were his most trusted allies, we would consider their report as representative of Jesus' self-perception of his social identity. Similarly, since Muhammad believed and propagated what Allah had revealed to him concerning who he is in the Qur'an, we would take what is said about Muhammad in the Qur'an as representative of his self-perception of his social identity, on the basis that Muhammad transmitted the Qur'an to his followers because he himself believed what it says, including what it says about his social identity. While the Islamic Hadith and some extra-canonical literature in Christian tradition will supplement this study, the focus shall remain on the most revered sacred literature of Christianity and Islam – the Bible and Qur'an, respectively. The focus on the Bible and Qur'an, being the most revered sacred literature in Christianity and Islam, is consistent with the present study's focus on the SIC of the most revered 'human' characters in the two religions – Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad, respectively. Moreover, the focus is placed on the narrated rather than the historical Jesus and Muhammad in consonance with the way these religious figures are perceived and received in Northern Nigeria, which is the primary context and locus of the research.

THE PREMISE OF THE STUDY: INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AND PEACEBUILDING IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Noteworthy is that the research is primarily situated within the purview of interreligious dialogue towards peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria. This broad pursuit underpins the specific focus of the study on the

elements or indices of high social identity complexity of these two most revered religious figures in Christianity and Islam, respectively. In other words, the aim of this study is not to discuss both the high and low social identity complexity of Jesus and Muhammad, nor is it to compare their Social Identity Complexity (SIC) to ascertain who has higher or lower SIC. Instead, the aim is to identify and describe elements of high SIC in their respective lives, titles, teachings, and actions so as to project it in the empirical aspect of the research, towards promoting high SIC in Northern Nigeria in the overall interest of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Any kind of comparison between the two revered religious figures is for the purpose of explanation or clarification only.

Muhammad: Personhood and SIC

The name (or the word) “Muhammad” is originally a participle that means “the highly exalted/praised one” or “the highly loved one.”² Muhammad is reported to have been born in the year 570 AD, around the time of the War of Elephants. Not long after, his father Abd Allah died, and his mother Amina died later when he was about 6 years old. As a result, he was under the custody of his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib, who also died a few years later, resulting in Muhammad being taken care of by his uncle Abu Talib.³ Abu Talib used to travel frequently with Muhammad to Syria, during which, when he was about 12 years old, it was reported that a Syrian Christian monk by the name Bahira in the city of Bosra prophesied that Muhammad would later be a prophet of the Arab people.⁴

In contrast to Jesus’ simultaneous divine and human personhood as presented in Christian Scriptures and tradition, Muhammad made it clear that he was human like any human being.⁵ “Say, ‘O Prophet,’ ‘I am only a man like you, ‘but’ it has been revealed to me that your God is only One God. So whoever hopes for the meeting with their Lord, let them do good deeds and associate none in the worship of their Lord” (Q18:110).

Moreover, in Q6:50, Muhammad says he does not have access to the depositories concerning the provisions of Allah, nor does he know the unseen, nor is he an angel. “Say, ‘O Prophet,’ ‘I do not say to you that I possess Allah’s treasures or know the unseen, nor do I claim to be an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me.’ Say, ‘Are those blind ‘to the truth’ equal to those who can see? Will you not then reflect?’”

Furthermore, in Q7:203, Muhammad says he only follows what is revealed to him from his Lord. “If you ‘O Prophet’ do not bring them a sign ‘which they demanded’, they ask, ‘Why do you not make it yourself?’ Say, ‘I only follow what is revealed to me from my Lord. This ‘Quran’ is an insight from your Lord—a guide and a mercy for those who believe.’” The humanity of Muhammad is equally seen in the way that he could be tempted by Satan like any other human (Q7:200; 23:97f); he would die

like any other human (Q39:30); could make mistakes and demand God's forgiveness (Q47:19, cf. 48:1-3).⁶ The name Muhammad appears in four places in the Qur'an: 3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29, which is the earliest occurrence of the name Muhammad in written history,⁷ but without any reference to his being supernatural or divine.

However, Muhammad's unequivocal assertion of his humanity does not take away his place of prominence in Islam. While the belief that Muhammad is the Messenger of God is only second to belief in the Oneness of God according to the Islamic *shahada*, Muhammad, nevertheless, is highly regarded in Islam. It is only that the exalted place that he occupies in Islam does not connote him being supernatural or divine,⁸ because the Qur'an and orthodox Islam emphatically affirm that Muhammad "was fully human with no supernatural powers."⁹

The question for the present study, however, is what implications does the personhood of Muhammad have for identifying and describing his SIC? The answer lies in Muhammad's attitude towards his unique place in Islam. For Allah to have created the light of Muhammad first and use same light to create humans, and for him to have received such a special revelation and be the seal of the Prophets (as we will see below) and yet did not attempt to deify himself but equated himself with ordinary mortals and related with them in such a manner indicates some level of high social identity complexity that transcends 'spiritual' or religious hierarchies to the common realm of humanity. In other words, Prophet Muhammad's unique stance in relation to Allah compared to other humans did not provoke a sense of 'otherness' in him, giving credence to his high social identity that crosses the borders of religious hierarchy as a social category.

Muhammad's Prophethood and SIC

To the extent that prophets form a subgroup within the broader Islamic ingroup, Muhammad's prophethood shows something about his SIC. Some Islamic traditions and their respective literature, such as the Sufi literature, connect Q17:1¹⁰ with a kind of ascension that Muhammad had to the Mosque in Jerusalem where he met other past prophets like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets and performed a prayer there in the 'Holy Temple.'¹¹ Afterwards, Angel Gabriel accompanied him to heaven in a ladder, and in each of the seven heavens, from down up, he met previous prophets like Adam, Jesus and John the Baptist, Joseph, Idris (Enoch), Aaron, and Moses, and finally Abraham.¹² Prophet Muhammad, therefore, belongs in the group of the "prophets who had gone before" (Q33:38). Say, "I am not the first messenger ever sent, nor do I know what will happen to me or you. I only follow what is revealed to me. And I am only sent with a clear warning."

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Muhammad connects his earlier role as a shepherd boy with his prophethood, which affirms his self-perception of his social

identity as one belonging to the prophetic ingroup. He is reported to have joyfully recounted his early days later on in his life, when he said that God had not sent any prophet who was not first a herdsman. “God sent no prophet who was not a herdsman... Moses was a herdsman; David was also a herdsman; I, too, was commissioned to prophethood while I grazed my family’s cattle at Ajyād.”¹³

However, just as Christianity regards Jesus Christ as self-referent while other prophets make reference to him, therefore making him unique even within the prophetic ingroup, Islam also regards Muhammad as unique in the sense that he is “...the Messenger of Allah and the seal of the prophets. And Allah has ‘perfect’ knowledge of all things” (Q33:40). In other words, in the Islamic faith, even though Muhammad belongs to the prophetic ingroup like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, the son of Mary (Q 33:7), he is still the Prophet, the seal of the prophets. Muhammad’s special title of “Seal of the Prophets” ‘hātām an-nabīyīn’ is of particular relevance to his social identity, which is understood in Islamic tradition to be that Muhammad brings an end to the era of prophets, being the last prophet.¹⁴ But more than just a historical-chronological seal, but much more, Muhammad’s prophethood is qualitatively the sum of all previous prophets before him.¹⁵ For understanding his SIC, it shows that there would not be another prophet to belong to the prophetic ingroup, showing how restricted and inaccessible the prophetic ingroup is to Muhammad’s followers and all people after him.

In one of his Hadiths, Muhammad mentions 6 things that make him superior to other prophets before him, including: “(comprehensive and beautiful words) were given to me; I was helped by the element of fear; spoils became lawful for me, the earth became pure for me and it turned to a place of prostration and worship, I was sent to all people and I was chosen as the last of the prophets.”¹⁶

Muhammad’s statement that “I was sent to perfect the virtues of morality”¹⁷ further implies his superiority to the prophets who had gone before him. The idea of Muhammad perfecting moral virtues, supposedly of previous prophets and religions, indicates his self-perception as the prototype of not only his broader Islamic ingroup, but also his prophetic sub-group. Muhammad is the prototype of the Islamic ingroup not only in the sense that he perfects the virtues of morality, but also in the sense that ingroup members are to have faith in what has been revealed to him as the truth from Allah (47:2).

Some titles of Muhammad in relation to his calling and message may give us insight into his self-categorization as having additional roles more than other prophets who came before him. He is a Messenger of God “rasūl Allāh” who needs God’s protection (Q5:67; 17:94). He is a Warner or Admonisher “nadīr” (Q2:119; 35:24) and Announcer/Preacher “bašīr” (Q41:4), “dessen wichtigste Aufgabe darin besteht, seinen Zuhörer Gottes Botschaft zu vermitteln (Koran 5:99) und sie immer wieder daran zu

erinnern (dakkir/mudakkir) (Koran 52:29; 88:21), ohne eigene Macht über sie zu besitzen (Koran 88:22).¹⁸ Nevertheless, in the multitude of his titles and designations, “zwei Bezeichnungen Muhammads ragen jedoch heraus, um die göttliche Herkunft der koranischen Verkündigung und die Autorität des Verkünders zu bestätigen, nämlich dass er ‘Gesandter’ (rasūl) und ‘Prophet’ (nabī) ist.”¹⁹ So, when locating Muhammad’s social identity in relation to his message, greater emphasis is to be placed on him as a Messenger and Prophet, being his most important titles connected to his calling. Noteworthy in this regard is that the word *rasūl* appears 332 times and *nabī* appears 75 times in the Qur’an.²⁰ In at least one place (Koran 7:157-158), both titles are used for Muhammad.²¹

Tamer notes that Muhammad’s title as “prophet” places him in the category of biblical and ancient Arabic prophets, and his impact on monotheistic religions is noteworthy.²² His prophetic message was meant first and foremost for the Arabs (Koran 26:192-199; 42:7), but was meant to reach all peoples of the earth (Koran 25:1; 34:28),²³ something similar to Jesus’ mission together with his disciples (the Great Commission in Matthew 28).

The significance of Muhammad’s contact and grouping with other prophets for the present study is that, it situates him within the prophetic sub-group within the broader Muslims’ ingroup, thereby showing his level of SIC in crossing that social boundary to relate with other Muslims and non-Muslims who were not in that prophetic social ingroup and do not share in the ‘righteousness’ associated with the prophetic ingroup.

Muhammad and the Islamic Social Ingroup

Muhammad founded a community that has all the characteristics of a social ingroup. “Muhammad (PBUH) introduced Islam in the best way and made his way of life a symbol for the realization of such a society” (Moosavi) – meaning a monotheistic social ingroup where peace and tranquility on earth and in the final abode of man after death prevail (Muhammad’s early followers).

In comparing the Islamic ingroup and the outgroup and in so doing marking a clear boundary between the Islamic ingroup and outgroup, Qur’an 47 frequently uses the language of ‘believers’ and ‘disbelievers’ to differentiate the two. For example, Qur’an 47:3 says “...the disbelievers follow falsehood, while the believers follow the truth from their Lord.”

The Brotherhood verse shows how the Islamic ingroup membership supersedes any ethnic or racial identity. “The believers are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy” (Q49:10). With specific reference to Muhammad’s abolishing the practice of usury

because of its exploitative tendencies, Zohery affirms that for Prophet Muhammad, there is no difference between relatives and non-relatives.²⁴

The political authority of Muhammad in his newly established ingroup of the Muslim 'umma' and the need to obey God and his Messenger in both civil and military matters as well as to accept his verdicts as just, are well established in the Qur'an (24:47-52; 4:84; 9:73; 25:52).²⁵ However, the believers' commitment to the group was expected to outlive Muhammad. Q3:144 says, "Muhammad is not but a messenger. [Other] messengers have passed on before him. So if he was to die or be killed, would you turn back on your heels [to unbelief]? And he who turns back on his heels will never harm Allah at all; but Allah will reward the grateful" (3:144 sūrat āl 'im'rān, cf. 48:29; 47:2, Sahih International).

A sense of social identity can be found in the name Islam itself. Islam, meaning 'submission' (to Allah), suggests not only submitting oneself to Allah but also submitting one's ethnic, racial, national, or (previous) religious identities to God. Muhammad himself exemplifies such a submission of other identities to the dominant Muslim identity, which is seen in the way that there is only a scant mention of his commitment to his ethnic identity. His religious identity, the brotherhood, became his most important social identity.

Muhammad as the Prototype of the Muslim Ingroup

One of the characteristics of a social ingroup is group prototypes, the best representation of the group. In the Islamic social ingroup, Muhammad is explicitly the ingroup prototype. Muhammad is explicitly presented as an 'excellent example' to other Muslims in Q 33:21: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example for whoever has hope in Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah often." Being a man of outstanding character (Q68:4), Muhammad commands admiration and followership and becomes the standard of morality for the ingroup.

As a group prototype, Muhammad is an object of belief and obedience as a prophet and Messenger (Surah 24:62), while Allah is the ultimate one in whom followers of Muhammad believe. The following verses indicate how Muhammad is the Islamic group prototype who is to be followed and obeyed:

- i. Q3:2-3: Say, 'O Prophet,' "If you 'sincerely' love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive your sins. For Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful." Say, 'O Prophet,' "Obey Allah and His Messenger." If they still turn away, then truly Allah does not like the disbelievers.
- ii. Q4:59: O believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. Should you disagree on anything, then refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if you 'truly' believe in Allah and the Last Day. This is the best and fairest resolution.

- iii. Q4:69: And whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger will be in the company of those blessed by Allah: the prophets, the people of truth, the martyrs, and the righteous—what honourable company!
- iv. Q24:54: Say, “Obey Allah and obey the Messenger. But if you turn away, then he is only responsible for his duty¹ and you are responsible for yours.² And if you obey him, you will be ‘rightly’ guided. The Messenger’s duty is only to deliver ‘the message’ clearly.”

It is noteworthy that Muhammad’s prototypicality in the Islamic ingroup is not only in terms of religious practices, but also in character and every aspect of life, which is why the Sunnah of the Prophet as found in the Hadith are important in Islam. As the ultimate ingroup prototype, what Muhammad taught, did, or approved became yardsticks for measuring right and wrong in the Islamic ingroup, just as Jesus is the prototype of the Christian ingroup and what he taught, did or approved are considered the standard of Christian morality.

Muhammad, Non-Muslim Outgroup, and SIC

The merger mode of social identity representation is most evident in the way one relates with the outgroup; hence, discussing what Muhammad taught, did, or approved in terms of a peaceful relationship with the outgroup helps us to identify and describe his high SIC. In describing the political and religious contexts in which Muhammad was born and brought up, Tamer notes that it was not homogeneous as described by some scholars, but was a heterogeneous political and religious context.²⁶ He asserts that “Die religiöse Landschaft im Nahen Osten des 6. Und 7. Jahrhunderts war durchaus heterogeny.”²⁷ The starting point is that Muhammad lived and founded the first Islamic community in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world. In 603 C.E., during Muhammad’s time, there existed in Mecca six communities, including Christians, Hypocrites (who were neither in nor out in following the Prophet), Jews, pagans, fervent Believers, and Sabians.²⁸

Scholars are divided on whether, in Muhammad’s numerous devotions during his retreats and meditations in the cave of Hirā in search of the truth, he followed any one of the known religions of the time that he had listened to, such as the pagan religions of Makkah, Christianity, or Judaism. Some scholars claim that Muhammad followed the law of Noah, or the law of Abraham, or the law of Moses, or the law of Jesus, respectively. Others also claim that Muhammad, during those devotions, had followed every known law and observed it. Haykal favours this last view because “it agrees with what we know of Muhammad’s constant search for answers and for ways to the truth.”²⁹ The fact that Muhammad had an appreciation of other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, above his Makkan pagan religion or idolatry, as noted above, might have contributed to his tolerance towards Christians and Jews, as seen in the

stories below, where he was favourably disposed towards them. It is to be noted, however, that despite his consideration of Christianity and Judaism as holding some truth and therefore better than Makkan paganism, he did not consider them as having “anything to offer that would save his people from their misguidance.”³⁰

Muhammad shows appreciation for human differences in many instances. For example, in Q49:13, we find where it was revealed to him that: “O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ‘get to’ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware” (49:13). The basis on which this verse is to be understood as implying the Islamic ingroup is that it is addressed to all humans – “Oh humanity...” In this verse, we find an appreciation of human differences at three levels: gender difference, ethnic and racial difference, and religious difference. Appreciation for gender difference is seen in the clear recognition that God created humans as males and females. Appreciation for ethnic and racial differences is seen in the recognition that God created humans into peoples (races inclusive) and tribes or ethnic groups. Appreciation for religious difference is implied in the statement that “the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.”

While Muhammad’s perception of the righteous one is within the Islamic context, the verse does not imply that non-Muslims are not righteous in any sense. Instead, it is talking about the most noble in the sight of Allah as the most righteous among humans. This implies that other humans, both Muslims and non-Muslims, who are not ‘most righteous’ in the sense of the apex of righteous living, are still noble in the sight of Allah. In other words, reference to the ‘most noble’ and ‘most righteous’ in Q49:13 is to recognize how much God values those who live by the highest standards of righteousness as understood in Islam, without denigrating those who are not living in that apex of moral standard as ‘most righteous.’ Muhammad’s appreciation for religious difference is seen in Q10:99: “Had your Lord pleased, all the people of the earth would have believed in Him, one and all. Would you then force people to have faith?” This verse acknowledges religious difference as divinely permitted, so there is no need for forceful conversion. Such a recognition of difference and contradiction in human identities promotes high SIC.

Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad is reported in a ḥadīth collected by Imām Aḥmed to have said, "O humanity! Your Lord is one, and your ancestry is one. No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, nor is any non-Arab superior to any Arab. No white is superior to any black, nor is any black superior to any white except on account of their righteousness."³¹ Qur’an 49:13 and the quoted Hadith here would stand as the epic representation of Muhammad’s SIC, especially as it regards the human identity broadly stated, and ethnic, racial, and national identity.

Apart from the Qur'anic verses where we see an appreciation of human difference beyond the Islamic social ingroup, some actions or practices of Muhammad also contribute to our understanding of his SIC. For example, Muhammad invited non-Muslims to a debate and dialogue rather than to a fight. In Q3:64, it was revealed to him thus: Say, 'O Prophet,' "O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms: that we will worship none but Allah, associate none with Him, nor take one another as lords instead of Allah.' But if they turn away, then say, 'Bear witness that we have submitted 'to Allah alone'.'" Dogan asserts that "...the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) visited Christian churches and Jewish synagogues in order to foster understanding and put an end to the inter-religious enmity and hatred."³² Similarly, Prophet Muhammad honoured several invitations of the Jews of Medina who were ethnically and religiously different from him to dinner and lunch, and he ate with them in their houses gladly.³³ It takes a high SIC to acknowledge such religious differences and make such efforts to foster peaceful co-existence.

Moreover, it is reported that a group of Christians visited Prophet Muhammad to learn about Islam, and when it was time for their religious practice, he permitted them to use his *masjid* (mosque) rather than go looking for where to have their worship. The Christians had an open debate with the Prophet in the same *masjid* where he had allowed them to worship,³⁴ indicating that there was no compulsion to convert to Islam in that incident. The debate led to a peace treaty between the Christians and the Prophet, with the following affirmation as part of the treaty:

Christians have the right to live in safety, their property will be protected, their churches will not be harmed, monasteries will not be closed, and priests will not be impeded when performing their duties. Moreover, Christians will not be compelled to provide supplies for Muslims during times of war, and it is not permitted to interfere with or interrupt Christian worship.³⁵

One would, however, ask, what led to a peace treaty between the Christians and Muslims under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad at the time? The fact that they made a treaty suggests that there was some real or foreseen conflict. Whatever the case was, the treaty is an indication of mutual commitment to peaceful co-existence in the context of religious and cultural pluralism.

Furthermore, it is reported that a funeral procession of a Jew was passing close to the Prophet, so he got up to show respect for the funeral procession. Surprised, one of his followers said to him, "'O Allah's Apostle! This is the funeral procession of a Jew,'" and the Prophet responded by saying, "Isn't he a human being?"³⁶ This story illustrates the high SIC of Muhammad in crossing his ethnic and religious identity boundaries in honour of 'the other.'

SIC AND THE ETHNIC, GENDER, RACIAL, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Prophet Muhammad was born among the Quraysh tribe in Arabia,³⁷ as noted above. Before his prophethood, Muhammad participated in the life of his Quraysh tribe in Makkah to the extent that his activities were noble and modest, not indulgent.³⁸ It was in this context that he participated in wrecking and rebuilding the Ka'bah when it was destroyed by a flood. From his youthful age, even before his prophethood, he lived a decent, modest, and honest life that earned him the trust and admiration of his people. "Ever since he was a youth, his conduct was so perfect, manly, and truthful that all the people of Makkah agreed to call him 'al Amin', or 'the truthful', 'the loyal.'"³⁹ Muhammad's moral rectitude within his Quraysh community can be traced even before his prophethood in the way that, even though he participated in the life of his Quraysh people, he maintained a moral identity that distinguished him from most of them. Muhammad's participation in the Quraysh community from childhood is further seen in the way that he would join other children at the market square in Makkah and listen to poems being recited; he would also "listen to the speeches of Christian and Jewish Arabs who strongly criticized the paganism of their fellow countrymen, who told about the scriptures of Jesus and Moses, and called men to what they believed to be the truth."⁴⁰ Muhammad would, however, review the views of the Christians and Jews and prefer them to the paganism of his people, "though not quite convinced of their claims to the truth."⁴¹

Moreover, Muhammad's high SIC is seen in the role he played among his ethnic group in averting conflict and bloodshed during the dispute in rebuilding the Ka'bah. Each of the four clans of Makkah wanted to have the honour of laying the black stone in its place in the east wall of the Ka'bah, and they were ready to fight each other to the death to achieve this honour. In short, a civil war was imminent among the four Quraysh clans of Makkah.⁴² Muhammad's ingenuity in spreading a robe on the ground, getting each of the four clans to hold one edge of the robe, and taking the black stone together to the construction side, then using his own hands and laying it on its rightful place⁴³ speaks volumes not only of his wisdom, but also his recognition and appreciation of human difference even within the same ethnic ingroup. He did not use his power of arbitration in favour of his own clan, but gave fair, equal and just honour to each of the four tribes.

From the period of his prophethood, Muhammad's authority was primarily in the fact that he was sent by God as a witness, deliverer and warner who exposes the unbelief of his own people (33:45).⁴⁴ His role as a witness has significance for our study of his SIC in two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the fact that he emerged as a truthful and faithful one 'al Amin' and eventually as a prophet from among the pagans

is a witness against them to repent and accept the message of one of their own. On the other hand, the fact that he is no longer 'with or among them' in their idolatrous lifestyle is a witness to them to crossover into his new ingroup, the Muslim ingroup.

Muhammad's SIC is more evident when we consider the culture and context of the time, specifically that of his Quraysh tribe or ethnic group. Even though contested, for example by Tamer,⁴⁵ many Islamic sources claim that at the time Muhammad was born among the Quraysh tribe in Arabia, the region was isolated and was considered one of the most backward regions of the world in terms of its cultural, intellectual, and moral standards.⁴⁶ Racism and inter-tribal conflicts were so common such that "even the simplest disputes could incite inter-tribal fighting, sometimes developing into local wars which then spread to neighbouring tribes expanding into the inter-related tribal hierarchy on the peninsula."⁴⁷ Even within this deplorable social situation, the Quraysh people, Muhammad's tribe, considered themselves "superior to all other tribes and people."⁴⁸ For a Prophet to have emerged from such a context and yet held other tribes in good regard, crossed tribal boundaries by visiting Jews and other tribes, eating with them, and respecting their cultural practices, shows his high level of SIC. His high SIC is further seen in the way he affirms that "All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action and: 'Even if a black Abyssinian Muslim were to rule over Muslims, he should be obeyed.'"⁴⁹ In this regard, the Prophet promoted a virtue identity rather than a racial or national identity, showing that "...superiority is not by birth or colour or blood, but through morality and piety."⁵⁰

However, it seems that Muhammad's tribal identity did not play a major role in his prophethood, as there is a paucity of information about his self-reference to his tribal identity. This could, therefore, be taken both as a high or low SIC, depending on context. In relation to high SIC, the fact that Muhammad paid insignificant attention to his tribal identity shows that he was not a tribal bigot and did not uphold his tribal identity above his other identities. On the low side of SIC, it could be construed as a case of the dominance mode of social identity negotiation, where his religious identity dominates his tribal identity, such that it becomes less significant. It is to be noted that high or merger SIC recognizes the differences and contradictions among one's multiple identities and, without subverting one identity or upholding one over another, holds each social identity simultaneously.⁵¹

With specific reference to racism, Muhammad's high SIC is seen in the fact that he emancipated and adopted (before he received the revelation that abolished adoption) a black slave by name Zayd ibn Haritha (renamed Zayd ibn Muhammad)⁵² and even made him the "commander of the Muslim army when they were sent to fight the

Byzantine Empire at a time when such leading and experienced Companions as Abu Bakr, 'Umar, Ja'far ibn Abū Tālib, and Khalid ibn Walid were among the soldiers.”⁵³

Muhammad crossed gender boundaries to foster peaceful co-existence across gender identities. Noting how Islam is often criticized in the West for its attitude towards women, Dogan argues that Islam's attitude towards women should be assessed based on Prophet Muhammad's attitudes and behaviour towards women rather than how women are perceived in Muslim countries today, for Prophet Muhammad's attitude towards women shows how women are expected to be treated in Islam.⁵⁴ Dogan argues, therefore, that Prophet Muhammad respected women, protected their rights, and admonished his followers to do the same. “During his prophethood, women started to experience true love, honour, and respect through the Islamic teachings. They were given rights previously denied to them, and these were put into action by the Prophet (pbuh) himself.”⁵⁵ The Prophet is reported to have said to his followers that “The most perfect believers are the best in character, and the best of you are those who are kindest to their wives.”⁵⁶ While Prophet Muhammad's attitude towards women, as described above, is appreciable, it explicates his SIC the more if it is considered in the light of the cultural milieu of the time and the position of women in that culture. Before Muhammad came to the scene, women in the Arab world were of little or no value, such that a woman could even be buried alive for an offense committed without much remorse.⁵⁷ For Muhammad to have come from such a culture and accord such a level of respect to women, who did not share the same gender identity with him, shows his level of SIC that crosses gender boundaries in the service of the common good. Such respect accorded to women may not meet the standards or expectations of the 21st-century Western-influenced cultures, but it was at least an important progress in that context.

Al-Karmi describes Prophet Muhammad's positive social dexterity as “compromise,” noting that his ability to live with a reasoned and reasonable balance between his religious piety and the world around him is evidence of positive compromise that promotes peace. Such an example of Muhammad's compromise is seen in the several treaties he made with people outside the Islamic ingroup, such as his treaty with his Quraysh people at Hudaibiya.⁵⁸ Similarly, Kholis affirms that Prophet Muhammad taught and exemplified love, noble character, and brotherhood that transcended gender, age, racial, ethnic, national, and religious boundaries.⁵⁹ Prophet Muhammad's kind of love is “the love that makes a person love to help others, serve them, respect them, and treat them in every humane way possible without expecting something in return.”⁶⁰ The Prophet made many compromises in his social relationship with unbelievers, idolaters, and pantheists without compromising his basic religious convictions. Such a high SIC is exemplary for promoting high social identity complexity among Muslims in Northern Nigeria today, towards tolerance and peaceful co-existence with Christians, African traditionalists, atheists, and all people.

CONCLUSION

Paying attention to the titles, words, and actions of Prophet Muhammad, this study identified his high social identity complexity in his personhood, prophethood, ethnic identity, his being a prototype of his Islamic ingroup, and his attitude towards non-Muslims. Situated within the context of ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria and the efforts towards peacebuilding between Christians and Muslims in the region, this study contributes to the attempt to promote high social identity complexity among Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria, to promote mutual tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Muhammad, from the Islamic side, and Jesus, from the Christian side, become resources for facilitating high social identity complexity in the service of tolerance and peaceful co-existence despite their religious differences.

ENDNOTES

¹Noteworthy is that, where both Muhammad and Jesus or Christianity and Islam are mentioned in a sequence, they are mentioned in alphabetical order except for direct quotations that may necessitate retaining the sequence of the respective authors being cited. If any comparison is made, it would be only as necessary for clarification rather than for evaluation.

²Georges Tamer, "Muhammad," in *Islam 1: Entstehung, Konfession, Dynastien. Die Religionen der Menschheit*, edited by Georges Tamer (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2023): 50-96, 53.

³Tamer, "Muhammad," 56.

⁴Tamer, "Muhammad," 56. See also Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira. Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden, 2008).

⁵Tamer, "Muhammad," 70

⁶Tamer, "Muhammad," 71

⁷Tamer, "Muhammad," 53

⁸Even though Muhammad, in one of his Hadiths in response to a question by Jabir bin Abdullah Ansari as to the first of God's creation, said that his (Muhammad's) light was the first thing God created, and from that light, God created everything else. "O' Jabir, God created the light of your Prophet first and then created every good thing from that light." (Kashaf Al-Khafaa, vol. 1, p. 269) Or he said: "the first thing that God created was my light, which he took from his light and derived from the glory of his greatness" (Awali Al-A'li, vol. 4, p. 99) (The Prophet Muhammad's [PBUH] Hadiths about Himself: <https://en.shafaqna.com/310761/muhammads-pbuh-hadiths-about-himself/> Accessed 11th March 2024). However, this is not to be equated with Christ's Trinitarian SIC, because it does not presume that Prophet Muhammad is a divine being, is God, or participated in creation. Instead, it retains Muhammad within the frame of the created humans. Moreover, this may correspond with Christ's assertion that he is the light ("I am the way, the truth and light..."). Nevertheless, the fact that Prophet

Muhammad asserts that God created his light and used his light to create other things does not clearly indicate that he is the light in the way that Jesus said he is the light.

⁹ Borsworth, C.E., E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs and Ch. Pellat, eds., "Muhammad," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition. Vol. VII, MIF – NAZ (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1993), 360-386, 360.

¹⁰ "Glory be to the One Who took His servant 'Muḥammad' by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We may show him some of Our signs.¹ Indeed, He² alone is the All-Hearing, All-Seeing."

¹¹ Tamer, "Muhammad," 70, n. 70.

¹² Tamer, "Muhammad," 70, n. 70.

¹³ Haykal, Muhammad Husein, *The Life of Muhammad*. Translated from the 8th Edition by Isma'il Ragi A. Al Faruqi (London: Shorouk International, 1983), 58.

¹⁴ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72-73.

¹⁵ Tamer, "Muhammad," 73.

¹⁶ The Prophet Muhammad's Hadith about Himself: <https://en.shafaqna.com/310761/muhammads-pbuh-hadiths-about-himself/>, citing Musnad Ahmad, Vol. 2, 412; Sahih Muslim, Vol. 2, 64, and Musnad Abi Yaali, Vol. 11, 378.

¹⁷ The Prophet Muhammad's Hadith about Himself: <https://en.shafaqna.com/310761/muhammads-pbuh-hadiths-about-himself/>, citing Makarem al-Akhlaq, Tabarsi, 8.

¹⁸ Tamer, "Muhammad," 71.

¹⁹ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

²⁰ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72, n. 74 and 75.

²¹ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

²² Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

²³ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

²⁴ Zohery, A., *Thematic Analysis Of Values In The Public Communication Of Prophet Muhammad*, 55 (PhD Thesis, Howard University, Order No. 3162059). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (305197549). Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/thematic-analysis-values-public-communication/docview/305197549/se-2>, Accessed 21.05.2025.

²⁵ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

²⁶ Tamer, "Muhammad," 54-56.

²⁷ Tamer, "Muhammad," 55.

²⁸ Richard Penaskovic, Review of "Muhammad Prophet of Peace Amid The Clash of Empires" by Juan Cole. *The Heythrop Journal* vii (2018), 326, 762.

²⁹ Haykal, Life of Muhammad, 72.

³⁰ Haykal, Life of Muhammad, 72.

³¹ (Q49:13, n. 1: <https://quran.com/49?startingVerse=13>)

³² Dogan, R. "Conflict Resolution Forms in the Life of Prophet Muhammad," in *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 4 (2): 9-19, 11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v04i02/51087>, citing Abū Ja'far

Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabarī, *Jami al-Bayan an Ta'wil al-Qur'ân* Vol. 3, Beirut: Ālam al-Kutub 1992, 162-163.

³³ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 12, citing Ahmad bin Hanbel, *Musnad*, vol. 5. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012. 210

³⁴ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 10.

³⁵ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 11.

³⁶ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 12, citing Muhammad ibn Ismail Bukhari, *Al-Jāmi' Al-Sahih, Iman*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 1997, 50.

³⁷ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 10.

³⁸ Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 63-66.

³⁹ Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 58.

⁴⁰ Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 55.

⁴¹ Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 55.

⁴² Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 65-66.

⁴³ Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 66.

⁴⁴ Tamer, "Muhammad," 72.

⁴⁵ Tamer states that "Anders als Schilderungen aus der islamischen Tradition vermuten lassen, war die Arabische Halbinsel im 7. Jahrhundert kein isolierter, kultur- und zivilisationsleerer Raum, sondern Teil eines größeren Kontexts, der auch den östlichen Mittelmeerraum samt seinen jahrtausendealten Kulturen und Zivilisationen sowie einer Vielfalt von lebendigen Religionen und Weltanschauungen umfasste" ("Contrary to what accounts from the Islamic tradition might suggest, the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century was not an isolated, culture- and civilization-less region, but part of a larger context that also included the eastern Mediterranean with its millennia-old cultures and civilizations, as well as a diversity of vibrant religions and worldviews"), Tamer, "Muhammad," 54.

⁴⁶ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 10.

⁴⁷ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 10.

⁴⁸ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 15.

⁴⁹ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 15, Citing Ahmad bin Hanbel, *Musnad* Vol 5 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012), 441 and Muslim, *Sahīh*, Chapter Imara: 37.

⁵⁰ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 16.

⁵¹ Roccas and Brewer, 2002.

⁵² Haykal, 69

⁵³ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 15-16; Muslim, *Sahīh*, Chapter Fadāil Saḥābah: 63.

⁵⁴ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 16.

⁵⁵ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 16.

⁵⁶ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 16, citing Abu Dāwud, *Sunan, Sunnah*, 15.

⁵⁷ Dogan, "Conflict Resolution," 16; Haykal, *Life of Muhammad*, 68.

⁵⁸ Al-Karmi, Hasan. "The Prophet Muhammad and the Spirit of Compromise," in *Islamic Quarterly* 8, 3 (1964), 91.

⁵⁹ Kholis, Nur, "The Potential for the Prophet Muhammad's Teaching of Love to Improve the Culture of Leadership in Indonesian Islamic Schools," (Master of Arts

Thesis, McGill University Montreal, Canada, 2003, Order No. MQ88656
<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/potential-prophet-muhammads-teaching-love-improve/docview/305265415/se-2>, Accessed 21.05.2025.

⁶⁰. Kholis, "Prophet Muhammad's Teaching of Love," 42.