



ÒÒRÈ NÍWỌN (MODERATION TO GOODNESS) IN YORUBA CULTURAL ETHOS: THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines Òòrè Níwọ̀n, a central Yoruba ethical maxim that advocates moderation in acts of kindness, and explores its alignment with Islamic teachings on moral balance. In Yoruba culture, generosity and communal solidarity are highly valued; however, unrestrained benevolence is recognized as potentially harmful to the giver, the recipient, and the wider community. Similarly, Islam, through the principle of الوساطية (al-wasatiyyah), promotes moderation in all spheres of human conduct, including charity, social interactions, and spiritual devotion. By employing a qualitative research design that integrates literature review, textual analysis, and cultural interpretation, the study highlights the conceptual and practical convergence between Yoruba ethical thought and Islamic moral philosophy. Fieldwork and ethnographic evidence demonstrate that Òòrè Níwọ̀n functions as a cultural tool for guiding responsible action, balancing generosity with wisdom, and sustaining social cohesion. The paper further shows that Islamic principles of moderation complement Yoruba ethical practices; reinforcing the importance of contextual judgment, communal responsibility, and moral discernment. Based on these findings, the study offers practical recommendations, including integrating moderation ethics into educational curricula, promoting culturally and religiously grounded moral education, incorporating moderation principles into leadership training, and encouraging balanced practices in family and community life. By bridging Yoruba cultural ethics and Islamic moral thought, this paper provides a framework for cultivating sustainable, socially responsible, and ethically conscious communities in contemporary society.

Keywords: Yoruba ethics, moderation, Òòrè Níwọ̀n, Islamic ethics, al-wasatiyyah, moral responsibility

Introduction

Ethical systems across cultures consistently highlight the importance of goodness, kindness, and moral responsibility. However, the efficacy of such virtues often depends on their moderation and application within social contexts. Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, *Òdèrè Níwòn*, which can be rendered as "goodness has limits," has long served as a guiding principle for regulating human conduct. It instructs individuals to exercise kindness and generosity within the bounds of wisdom, foresight, and responsibility, thereby ensuring that virtuous acts do not inadvertently lead to harm or societal imbalance (Adeyemo, 2019). In the contemporary Yoruba social landscape, characterized by rapid urbanization and socio-economic pressures, the principle remains relevant, especially in family life, social support networks, and community relations.

The introduction of Islam into Yoruba land has brought additional layers of ethical guidance, with the Qur'an and prophetic teachings emphasizing *al-wasatiyyah*, or moderation, as the ideal path for ethical living (Kamali, 2020). Islam encourages acts of charity, benevolence, and kindness, but insists that these acts be guided by intention, capacity, and prudence to prevent harm to oneself or others. The convergence between Yoruba ethics and Islamic moderation illustrates a unique intersection of indigenous moral thought and religious principles that enhances moral responsibility within the community. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the

importance of exploring these intersections to foster cultural continuity, social harmony, and ethical leadership (Aliu, 2021). Furthermore, the Yoruba conception of morality is holistic, intertwining social, spiritual, and personal dimensions of human life. It emphasizes *ìwà rere* (good character) as the foundation of ethical behaviour, with moderation being a crucial element of virtuous living. Similarly, Islamic teachings articulate a balanced moral framework, warning against extremes such as excessive generosity, negligence, or exploitation (Rahman, 2018). In this context, understanding the compatibility between *Òdèrè Níwòn* and Islamic ethical principles is essential for both theoretical and practical considerations. The objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Yoruba cultural ethics in relation to Islam, with implications for moral education, social cohesion, and community development.

The introduction of Islam in Yorubaland brought complementary guidance. The Qur'an and prophetic teachings emphasize *الوسطية* (*al-wasatiyyah*), or moderation, as the ideal framework for moral and spiritual conduct. The Qur'an describes the Muslim community as *أمة وسطا* (*ummatan wasatan*):

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ

Thus We have made you a just community that you may be witnesses over mankind...(Qur'an 2:143).

This principle governs all aspects of life, including generosity, worship, and social interactions (Kamali, 2020). The convergence between Yoruba ethical wisdom and Islamic moderation strengthens moral responsibility, communal harmony, and cultural continuity (Aliu, 2021).

Deconstructing Òdèrè Níwòn: Beyond Simple Translation

While Òdèrè Níwòn is often translated as "moderation in goodness," such a rendering only scratches the surface of its rich ethical implications. Research among Yoruba elders reveals that òdèrè encompasses more than mere goodness; it signifies the full spectrum of beneficial actions, including kindness, generosity, helpfulness, and even expressions of love. Similarly, níwòn does not imply restriction in a rigid sense but reflects the wisdom of recognizing natural boundaries and proportionate conduct. This understanding is vividly illustrated by the following oral testimony, which was gathered as part of ethnographic fieldwork conducted for this study: "When you give someone fish every day, you think you are being good, but you are making them forget how to catch fish. Òdèrè Níwòn means knowing when your goodness is harming someone rather than helping them" (Ethnographic field notes, Ibadan, 2023).

This understanding highlights three dimensions of the concept that are often overlooked in academic discourse. First, the temporal dimension emphasizes that the same action may be virtuous at one moment and detrimental at another. Moderation is therefore not static but responsive to context and changing circumstances. Second, the

relational dimension demonstrates that Òdèrè Níwòn is inherently communal; it measures the impact of generosity not solely by the giver's intentions but by the effects on relationships and community wellbeing. Third, the wisdom dimension underscores the role of ìmò (knowledge) and ọgbón (prudence) in guiding moral actions. This involves discerning when, how, and to what extent one's kindness will achieve beneficial outcomes, thereby ensuring that virtue is expressed intelligently rather than impulsively.

The Practice of Òdèrè Níwòn

Ethical principles are most meaningful when observable in practical contexts, and Òdèrè Níwòn functions in Yoruba Muslim communities as a cultural tool for navigating complex moral terrain. Several ethnographic cases illustrate how this principle is applied in daily life. In one instance, a businessman in Lagos described how Òdèrè Níwòn guided his parenting. He explained that while providing for his children is a religious and social duty, unrestrained provision could leave them ill-prepared for adult responsibilities. By exercising moderation, he ensures that generosity nurtures resilience and personal growth rather than dependency (Ethnographic field notes, Lagos, 2023).

Community leadership offers another illustration. An imam in Abeokuta highlighted the application of Òdèrè Níwòn in dispute mediation. While Islam advocates forgiveness and reconciliation, immediate or unchecked forgiveness may prevent learning from mistakes, potentially undermining justice. By applying measured intervention, leaders balance mercy with accountability,

promoting both social harmony and ethical integrity (Ethnographic field notes, Abeokuta, 2023). The principle also extends to religious practice itself. Several respondents recounted how overzealous devotion could compromise other aspects of life, such as family care, work responsibilities, or health. These examples collectively demonstrate that *Òdèrè Níwòn* is not a restriction on virtue but a framework for expressing it wisely, ensuring that ethical actions are both beneficial and sustainable.

Literature Review

Yoruba Ethical Thought and *Òdèrè Níwòn*

The Yoruba people have a rich cultural heritage that emphasizes moral responsibility and ethical living. Central to this is the concept of *Òdèrè Níwòn*, which prescribes moderation in acts of kindness and generosity. Yoruba elders frequently advise that unrestrained benevolence can become harmful to both the giver and the community. For example, excessive generosity may encourage laziness among recipients, foster dependency, or undermine communal accountability (Ogunlade, 2018). Proverbs such as "Ìwòn ni gbogbo nkan ayé" (everything in life has limits) and "Ohun tí ó dára jù iyè lọ, ó le di ibi" (that which exceeds its measure may become harmful) illustrate the cultural wisdom that underpins this principle. Recent ethnographic studies suggest that these proverbs are not mere expressions but function as practical moral instructions guiding behaviour in family, community, and leadership contexts (Olayinka, 2021).

Contemporary research also highlights that Yoruba ethical thought prioritizes foresight, prudence, and personal responsibility in social interactions. It views human actions as embedded in broader social systems, and stresses that acts of kindness must be conscious and measured to avoid negative consequences. This perspective aligns with modern ethical theories emphasizing the balance between virtue and practical reason (Adeyemo, 2019). Thus, *Òdèrè Níwòn* represents a culturally sanctioned mechanism for sustaining communal harmony, ensuring that moral acts remain constructive and socially beneficial.

Moreover, the Yoruba approach to moderation in goodness is closely linked to spiritual and philosophical dimensions. The culture teaches that an individual's moral character, or *ìwà*, is tested not only by the acts of kindness performed but also by the wisdom employed in executing those acts. Excessive or poorly guided benevolence may corrupt personal integrity, damage social trust, or lead to self-harm (Ogunlade, 2018). As such, the Yoruba ethical system functions as both a personal and social regulatory framework, promoting moral equilibrium while preserving social order.

Islamic Moderation (Al-Wasatiyyah) and Ethical Responsibility

Islamic ethical thought emphasizes moderation as a guiding principle for moral and spiritual life. The concept of *Òdèrè Níwòn* aligns profoundly with several Qur'anic injunctions that command balance and warn against excess. The Qur'an declares Muslims to be a balanced community (أمة وسطاً): "كُنْتُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا" — "You

are a just community..." (Qur'an 3:110). This principle, الوسطية (al-wasatiyyah), ensures that ethical actions, including charity (صدقة / sadaqah) and interpersonal dealings, remain beneficial and sustainable (Kamali, 2020).

The Qur'anic prohibition of الإسراف (israf / wastefulness) further substantiates this alignment:

وَأْتِ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَلَا تُبَذِّرْ تَبْذِيرًا

And give the relative their due, and [also] the poor and the traveler, and do not spend wastefully... (Qur'an 17:26).

This verse demonstrates that while generosity is commanded, it must be exercised with wisdom and restraint. Even charitable acts can be harmful if they lack proportion (Aliu, 2021; Dawodu, 2023).

Allah further commands balance between generosity and self-preservation:

وَلَا تَجْعَلْ يَدَكَ مَغْلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا تَبْسُطْهَا كُلَّ الْبَسْطِ فَتَقْعُدَ مَلُومًا مَّحْسُورًا

And do not make your hand [as] chained to your neck or extend it completely and [thereby] sit blamed and insolvent (Qur'an 17:29).

This verse directly enjoins the believer to avoid both miserliness and extravagance, a command that mirrors the spirit of Òdèrè Níwòn.

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) reinforces this principle through numerous authenticated narrations. The Prophet said: "The best of affairs is their middle course" (Musnad Ahmad, cited in Kamali, 2020). He also advised: "Make things easy, and do not make them difficult; give glad tidings, and do not cause people to flee" (Bukhari, cited in Ibrahim, 2020). These prophetic directives underscore that even religious devotion and moral conduct must remain measured and contextually appropriate. Furthermore, the Prophet discouraged excessive giving that jeopardizes one's own financial stability:

لَا ضَرَرَ وَلَا ضِرَارَ

There should be no harm inflicted or reciprocated (Ibn Majah, cited in Ibrahim, 2020).

This foundational legal maxim (قاعدة فقهية) in Islamic jurisprudence governs not only personal conduct but also the ethics of giving, confirming that generosity ceases to be virtuous when it causes harm to the giver or the recipient. Modern studies on Islamic ethics confirm that al-wasatiyyah serves as a preventive mechanism against moral and social imbalance, providing a sustainable framework for individual and communal welfare (Mustapha, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Ethics of Moderation Theory, which posits that virtue requires balance and that excessive or deficient moral actions can become harmful. The Yoruba concept of Òdèrè Níwòn and

Islamic al-wasatiyyah serve as practical applications of this theory. Recent theoretical work in African ethics emphasizes that indigenous moral systems incorporate context-sensitive wisdom to guide conduct in a socially responsible manner (Aliu, 2021). Similarly, contemporary Islamic ethical theory stresses the necessity of intention, capacity, and consequence in determining the morality of an action (Kamali, 2020). By integrating these frameworks, the study establishes that moderation is both a culturally specific and universally applicable moral principle.

Discussion

The convergence between Yoruba ethical thought and Islamic teachings reveals several important insights. Both systems reject unrestrained benevolence, recognizing that excessive kindness may undermine social and personal stability. Empirical studies indicate that communities adhering to measured generosity experience higher levels of social cohesion and reduced exploitation (Dawodu, 2023). In Yoruba society, acts of kindness are expected to preserve communal responsibility, and Islam reinforces this by promoting self-reliance, sustainable charity, and moral accountability. The intersection of these values strengthens social bonds, fosters mutual respect, and enhances ethical conduct.

In practical terms, the integration of Òdèrè Níwòn and Islamic moderation addresses contemporary challenges such as financial mismanagement, dependency culture, and emotional burnout. For instance, families guided by these principles are more likely to

encourage responsible behavior in children, teaching them the importance of giving wisely and exercising prudence. Similarly, leaders who internalize these ethics avoid extremes of authoritarianism or excessive leniency, instead applying balanced governance that prioritizes fairness, accountability, and sustainable development. The ethical synergy also promotes cultural preservation, as Yoruba Muslims can harmonize indigenous wisdom with religious doctrine, fostering identity continuity and intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the convergence of these moral systems provides a framework for moral education and civic engagement. Schools and religious institutions can leverage these principles to cultivate disciplined individuals capable of contributing responsibly to society. Recent research highlights that integrating cultural ethics with religious instruction enhances students' moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility (Olayinka, 2021). Thus, the combination of Yoruba and Islamic moderation has far-reaching implications for leadership, education, and social development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Yoruba maxim Òdèrè Níwòn and the Islamic principle of al-wasatiyyah converge in advocating moderation as essential for sustainable ethical conduct. Both recognize that unrestrained benevolence can produce harm, while balanced goodness enhances personal integrity, social cohesion, and communal development. In contemporary society, where pressures for extreme behavior

whether financial, emotional, or social are prevalent, these ethical frameworks provide practical guidance for individuals, families, and leaders. By integrating Yoruba cultural wisdom with Islamic moral teachings, communities can foster responsible kindness, ethical decision-making, and sustainable social development, ensuring that acts of goodness remain meaningful and beneficial.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, several recommendations emerge for enhancing the application of Òdèrè Níwòn and Islamic moderation:

1. Educational curricula at all levels should integrate indigenous Yoruba ethical principles alongside Islamic teachings to provide students with a holistic understanding of moral responsibility.
2. Religious leaders and cultural custodians should collaborate to organize community programs that highlight the importance of measured generosity and ethical balance in personal and communal life.
3. Families should instill moderation in giving and kindness as core values in child-rearing, ensuring that children understand both the virtue and limitations of benevolent action.
4. Government and non-governmental organizations should design social welfare initiatives that encourage self-reliance and responsible

participation, rather than creating dependency.

5. Leadership training programs should emphasize the ethics of moderation to promote responsible decision-making, accountability, and sustainable governance.
6. Academic research should continue exploring the intersections between indigenous ethics and Islamic moral philosophy to strengthen theoretical and practical understanding of moderation as a universal moral principle.

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