The Nature of Majalisa Urban Social Group in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary finding of an ongoing Institutional Based Research sponsored by TETFUND on the Utility of Majalisa Social Group for post insurgency peace building in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. In many urban areas in northern parts of Nigeria an informal congress of social group called Majalisa is commonly found where members gather frequently at a particular place to parley and wail time mostly during evening hours. The size of the groups, socioeconomic characteristics of members, issues that are discussed and the mode of discussion widely varies as the groups. However, prevailing social and political issues in the community, in the country or the world at large are topics commonly discussed in Majalisa. There are tendencies that community action strategy on certain crucial matters may emanate from Majalisa discussions to involve the larger community, social movements or political group. This study examines the nature, distribution and activities of the Majalisa social group in Maiduguri Urban with the view to understand their contribution to urban social order and explore their potentials for use in sustainable peace building aftermath of Boko Haram insurgency in the city. The groups were randomly selected in each of the political wards of the City and a sample of members of the groups were interviewed using an online questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion with selected Majalisa. Five hundred and twenty respondents were interviewed and ten sessions of FGD were held in different wards. It was observed that Majalisa Social group is commonly found in every ward of the city. The characteristics of its membership is diverse in age group, educational level, occupational mix and gender. Majilisa Social Groups evolve spontaneously and seldom have an organize structure of leadership, planned activity or being registered by any authority. However, it promotes social connection of people of similar interest and brings harmony in the community.

Keywords: *Social group, Social connection, Harmony, Peace building*

Introduction

A *Majalisa* social group can be defined as two or more people who interact with one another, share similar characteristics, and collectively have a sense of unity, in a given location or in virtual world. Characteristics shared by members of such group may include interests, values,

representations, ethnic or social background, or professional ties. Yusuf (2022) posited that characteristically social group is a patterned relationship, sustained over time, between two or more people and group members have role and position in the structure of the group interaction system.

The term *Majalisa* was derived from Arabic word *majlis,* which means a place to gather and sit to discuss issues. It can be formally referred to legislature or a Council. In many urban areas in northern parts of Nigeria, group of people frequently gather at a particular place or location called *Majalisa* to spend time. Majalisa mostly sit in the evenings when people are back from work or business or during weekends and public holidays. The size of the groups, socioeconomic characteristics of members, issues that are discussed and the mode of discussion widely varies as the groups. However prevailing social, economic and political issues in the community, in the country or the world at large are commonly discussed in *Majalisa.* There are tendencies that community action strategy on certain crucial social and political matters may emanate and escalate from a *Majalisa* to involve the larger community.

Social groupings are very vital in community development, especially in insurgency and war-torn areas. For peace to be established and sustained in post insurgency areas, there will be need to socially engage the community for promoting peace through strengthened social groups as has been seen in many places (Akinyetun, 2023).

Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno State, has been significantly affected by the *Boko Haram* insurgency. The aftermath of the conflict has left the community in dire need of sustainable peace-building initiatives. The '*Majalisa'* urban social group, traditionally known for its role in community bonding and social support, presents a unique opportunity for fostering peace and rebuilding trust within the community. Recently there is a semblance of peace returning to Maiduguri the State Capital. Government and humanitarian Agencies have been trying to restore hope of people affected by the activities of *Boko Haram* insurgents through many peace building initiatives (Abubakar 2021). Sustainable peace building in any crisis torn area is very pertinent and experiences in peace-making elsewhere had shown many models. There are associative features of peace building through social groupings. Society needs lots of social cohesion, bridging and bonding to promote peace for all.

Majalisa as an informal congress or social group are commonly found in Maiduguri. There are several studies on formal social groups but not much attention was given to assess *Majalisa* as an informal social group particularly for its potential utilization for sustainable post insurgency peace in Maiduguri. Its potentials for social mobilization have not been explored academically. There is a need to explore the nature of the indigenous social structures like the '*Majalisa*' to understand their potential in contributing to long-term peace, stability and social development in Maiduguri.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the utility of the *Majalisa* social groups in sustainable peace building process in Maiduguri the Borno State capital. Specific objectives include to:

    i.   identify how *Majalisa* is formed and operate as informal social group in Maiduguri.
    ii.   examine the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of members of the *Majalisa* Social Groups.

  iii. examine the functions and benefits of *Majalisa* to group members and the society at large in Maiduguri.

  iv. analyze the role of *'Majalisa'* in community cohesion and conflict resolution.

  v. identify and examine ways of using *Majalisa* social group for promoting sustainable post-insurgency peace in Maiduguri.

  vi. provide recommendations for integrating *'Majalisa'* into formal peace-building frameworks.

Literature Review

Researches on social group is anchored on the premises of how a social group is formed, how does it function and how to describe the social interaction that occur on the way to forming the group. There are two basic approaches in studying social groups. These are social cohesion and social identification approaches. A social group exhibits some degree of social cohesion and is more than a simple collection or aggregate of individuals. Characteristics shared by members of a group may include interests, values, representations, ethnic or social background, and kinship ties. Kinship ties being a social bond based on common ancestry, marriage, or adoption a Yusuf (2021). However, some researchers consider the defining characteristic of a group as social interaction. Otherwise known as the social identity model, assumes that psychologically group membership has primarily a perceptual or cognitive basis (Mohammed, 2024). The model posits that the necessary and sufficient condition for individuals to act as group member is the awareness of a common category membership and that a social group can be usefully conceptualized as a number of individuals who have internalized the same social category membership as a component of their self-concept (Akinyetun, 2023). Stated otherwise, while the social cohesion approach expects group members to ask "who am I attracted to?", the social identity perspective expects group members to simply ask "who am I?"

Abubakar, (2021) defined social group as two or more people who interact with one another, share similar characteristics, and collectively have a sense of unity. Social group must have a patterned and structure of sustained relationship over time. Monda, (2020) classified three main kinds of human groups, which are the family as a group, work groups and friendship group.

People converge in space to share ideas and see how they can influence wider discourse. Such convergence ranges from the classical coffee joint in Europe where elite discussed political issues (Mohammed, 2024) to Mai Shayi Joints in Northern Nigeria where rational and irrational discussions occur. In any case, social group is an avenue for social integration (Mohammed, 2024) and such places allow for knowledge exchange and leisure from positive perspective.

The insurgency in North eastern Nigeria propelled by Boko Haram activities which had claimed a lot of lives and property have been relatively degraded (Uzoamaka, 2021). Humanitarian Agencies have been trying to restore hope of people affected by the insurgency through many peace building initiatives in the affected areas (Wildman, 2020).

For peace to be established and sustained in post insurgency areas, there is the need to socially engage the community. Social groups have been used in promoting peace in many places and they are very vital in community development initiatives (Yusuf, 2021). The *Majalisa* social groups have high potency in being utilized to build and sustain peace in Maiduguri.

Methodology

Maiduguri is the capital city of Borno State, Nigeria. It was founded in 1907 on the advice of the British colonialist to serve as the new administrative capital for the revived ancient Borno empire under their auspices. It continued serving as the administrative centre first of Borno Province under the colonial rule; later as the capital of North Eastern State after the Nigerian Civil war and presently the capital of Borno State since 1975. Maiduguri is also the cultural centre for the Kanuri people as well as the centre of Islamic and Western scholarship, commerce, industry, transport and communication for its present cosmopolitan population of over two million people. It is the regional centre which is the gateway to three neighboring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon Republics. The infamous *Boko Haram* insurgency which is bedeviling Nigeria for over a decade emanated from the city. Although the city has been liberated from the direct assault of the insurgency, its impact is felt with the immigration of displaced population of other places in the State under occupancy of the insurgents.

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. Data for this study was collected through digital field survey which involved mapping, structured interview and focus group discussions. The target population of the survey consists of all *Majalisa* groups in the study area which is not presently determined. *Majalisa* were identified through reconnaissance field trotting and mapped using GIS. A random sample of 100 *Majalisa* from the 15 political wards of Maiduguri Metropolitan Council and 5 wards in the urban portion of Jere Local Government Area were randomly selected for detailed survey. A sample of 500 respondents from the members of the sampled *Majalisa* groups were randomly selected. Eight sessions of Focus group discussion (FGDs) for male and two for female conducted across the twenty political wards of the city.

Results and Discussion

The Majalisa Phenomenon in Maiduguri

In almost all streets in Maiduguri a common sight in the evening is a group of people sitting by the roadside on benches, mats or bare ground virtually doing nothing but making gist. Some groups may be playing cards or *Kare* game. The location of the gathering is called *Majalis* The average membership is about ten. These groups are known as *Majalisa*, where people with common interest gather to spend time. The formation of *Majalisa* is not formal in any sense. A group of people may start assembling in a place after returning from work or business to wail time. mostly from evening sometime stay late into the night. For those without jobs, they start sitting in a *Majalisa* joint even in the morning hours hoping to be mobilize for some kind of job. The groups differ in number and sociodemographic characteristics of people who are very are regular coming to the *Majalisa* every day.

Pertaining to the primary occupations of members of *Majalisa*, the survey observed that over fifty two percent (275) of the members of *Majalisa* described themselves as self-employed, seventeen percent (89) civil servants, eight percent (44) private sector workers, ten percent (56) students and eleven percent (57) are unemployed. Figure 1 depicts the occupational distribution of people fond of resting at *Majalisa*
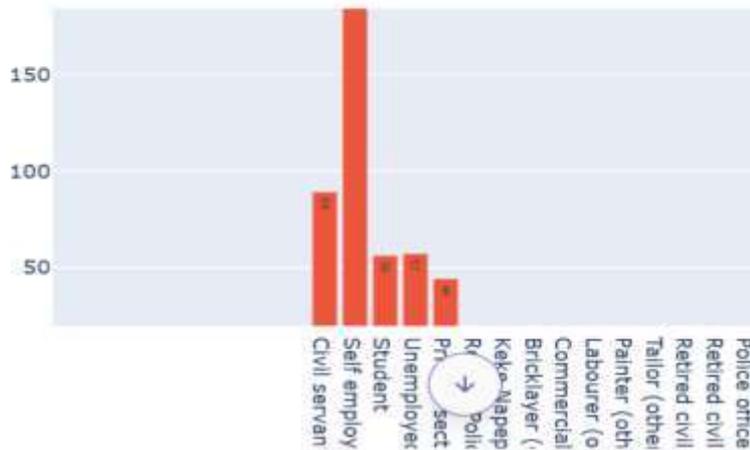
Figure 1 Occupational distribution of Majalisa members

The age characteristics of the members of Majalisa cut across all age groups. But most *Majalisa* are composed of young economically active persons. The modal age is between 30 to 39 years. A *Majilisa* may have an age mix of membership within five-to-ten-year cohort. However, a *Majalisa* can be classified by age cluster into young people, matured and elderly group of people. Figure 1 shows age distribution of regular members of *Majalisa*.
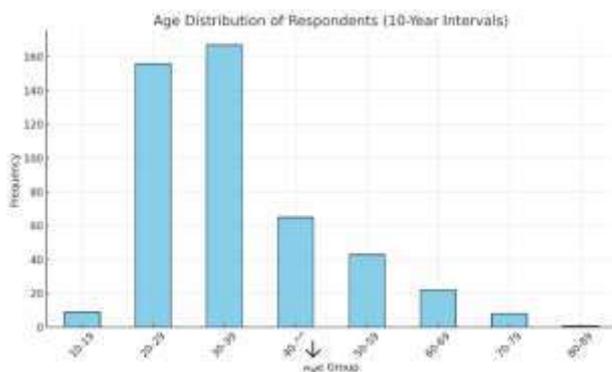

Fig 2 Age distribution of Members of *Majalisa*

Pertaining to the level of education, members of a *Majalisa* are compose of different education levels. The survey observed that 35% of those who sit in *Majalisa* regularly are secondary school leavers, 31% have tertiary education, 20% Islamic education, 5% primary education, 8% with no formal education. Although members of a *Majalisa* may have mix level of education, distinct composition of members with higher education, less educated, students and social class is observed in some *Majalisa*. Fig 3 shows the distribution of educational levels of members of Majalisa in the survey.
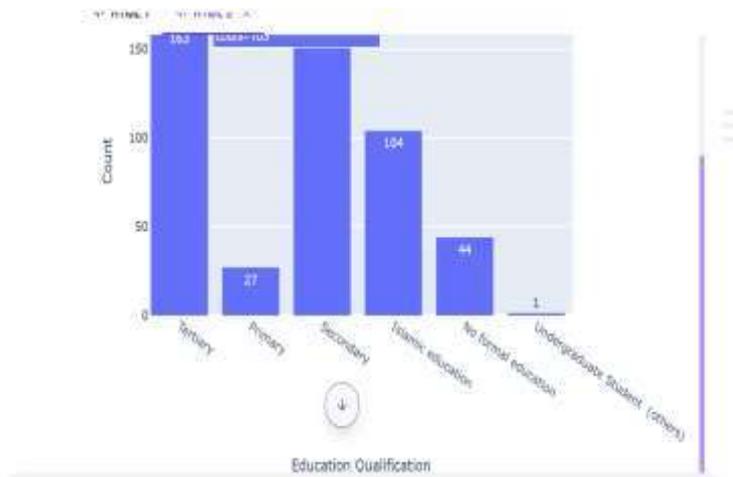
Fig 3 Distribution of level of Education of members

Majalisa was thought to be all male affair, because in Maiduguri as a Muslim community, women are not expected to sit on road side to form social groups like their male counterpart.. But the survey discovered that there are exclusive *Majalisa* of women in some parts of the City. With the coming of displaced people to the city, women living in large compounds, those living in camps or those who are virtually homeless, form a *Majalisa* to sit together and spend the day. Most often they may engage in cap making or petty trading. Also elderly women form *Majalisa* outside their home to spend time with their colleague, especially when men in the locality are away for work.

Functions and Activities

The formation of a Majalisa may not be purposely planned. But it is observed that membership of *Majalisa* may cluster towards some personal characteristics such as ethnic group, religious group, or occupational group. It is common to see *Majalisa* solely of people coming from certain region, states or local government Area; a tribal or cultural group or even social class. Unlike clubs and Associations, *Majalisa* have no official or leadership hierarchy. However, over the course time one or two members of a *Majalisa* may assume leadership or mobilization role. Many *Majalisa* perform late evening prayers at their *Majilas* (the place of sitting). Thus, they appoint an Imam among themselves to lead them in prayers and sometime take some religious lesson at the *Majalis*

The function of a *Majalisa* is basically socialization and peer bonding. A Majalisa is commonly formed by friends and acquittance but there are many instance people become friends as a result of meeting in a *Majalisa*. People crack jokes, tease one another and sometime argue without offense. FGD discussants unanimously agree that Majalisa members help one another in times of needs such as wedding, naming ceremonies, sickness or bereavement. They also participate in community development initiatives and informal support systems. There are some *Majalisa* with political inklings and local decision-making influence. Even people of nefarious characters and behaviors such as pick pockets, handset snatchers, hemp smokers, drug users and criminals form *Majalisa*.

The common pass time activity of a *Majilisa* is discussion about various issues of interest. It may include social discussions, political issues, religious and cultural events, economic and business activities and conflict resolution and mediation especially between members.   Issues

of local or global current affairs, the vogue in town, sports, and European football league are common topics especially among youth.

Discussions

Majalisa Social Group is a veritable setup for mobilization of community members to participate not only in peace building but community development in general. Using *Majalisa* groups for peacebuilding presents valuable opportunities to play a central role in mobilizing the community for peace building. *Majalisa* groups are deeply rooted in local culture and enjoy high levels of trust and participation among members. The regular gatherings make them ideal platforms for information dissemination, dialogue, and early warning systems. They often handle minor disputes informally, which can de-escalate tensions before they grow. Many Majalisa are composed of young men, a group often seen as conflict drivers. Engaging them constructively can transform them into peace champions. Their language, rituals, and humor align with local norms, making peace messages more acceptable and relatable. Joint financial contributions, job referrals, and emotional support activities within *Majalisa* can address root causes of conflict such as unemployment and frustration.

However, *Majalisa* groups operate informally without written rules or leadership hierarchies. This limit accountability, continuity, and structured peacebuilding initiatives. Financial and technical capacity for sustained peacebuilding activities (e.g., mediation, training, outreach) are lacking. *Majalisa* members may be loyal to religious, ethnic, or political identities, which can deepen divisions if not managed carefully. State and formal institutions are yet to recognize the legitimacy or potential of *Majalisa* in official peace processes. Local elites or politicians may co-opt *Majalisa* for propaganda or election-related conflicts. Majalisa are more prominent among male-dominated spaces, thus marginalizing women voices in conflict resolution efforts.

Recommendation

The *Majalisa* social group significantly shapes community cohesion in Maiduguri by fostering social networks that encourage cooperation, mutual support, and collective security among residents. This urban social group acts as a grassroots mechanism that enhances solidarity and trust within neighborhoods, which is crucial in a context marked by insecurity and displacement due to insurgency. *Majalisa* influences community cohesion in many ways including:

Building Mutual Support and Social Networks: Majalisa groups provide platforms for socialization and peer bonding among urban residents. They facilitate cooperation and collective responsibility, where members assist each other in daily challenges and emergencies, reinforcing a sense of belonging and loyalty to the community.

Enhancing Informal Security and Resilience: In Maiduguri, where insecurity from Boko Haram insurgency is still a persistent threat, Majalisa groups often collaborate with formal and informal security actors like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Their involvement in neighborhood surveillance and conflict resolution contributes to reducing insecurity, thereby strengthening social cohesion and community resilience[1].

Providing Social Services and Conflict Resolution: Beyond security, Majalisa groups help mediate disputes, support vulnerable members (such as assisting the sick or locating missing

children), and maintain social order. This broadens their role from mere social clubs to vital community actors that sustain peaceful coexistence and social stability.

Fostering Collective Identity and Urban Integration: The groups help integrate diverse residents, including displaced persons, by creating shared spaces for interaction and cooperation. This integration mitigates mistrust and fosters economic and social ties, which are essential for urban cohesion in Maiduguri's multi-ethnic context.

Navigating Political and Social Challenges: Although Majalisa groups are primarily social, they intersect with local political and traditional leadership structures, influencing community decision-making and resource distribution. This connection further anchors their role in maintaining social order and cohesion.

Conclusion

In summary, *Majalisa* groups in Maiduguri act as vital social institutions that promote solidarity, collective security, and resilience, thereby reinforcing community cohesion amid ongoing challenges of insecurity and displacement. *Majalisa* groups offer a culturally resonant and grassroots-driven avenue for peacebuilding—but to unlock their full potential, there must be: capacity-building for structure and neutrality, inclusion of women and youth voices, collaboration with formal institutions, and support in the form of training, resources, and recognition.

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