

***KAFFĀRAH* AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: EXPLORING THE SOCIOECONOMIC
IMPLICATIONS OF EXPIATION PRACTICES AMONG YORUBA MUSLIMS**

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Abstract

Kaffārah, an Islamic concept of expiation for sins and unfulfilled obligations, represents a spiritual practice with profound socioeconomic implications. Rooted in Qur'ānic injunctions and Prophetic traditions, kaffārah obliges believers to compensate for transgressions through acts such as feeding the poor, clothing the needy, or freeing captives. Among Yoruba Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria, the practice has taken on unique cultural expressions that blend Islamic injunctions with indigenous values of communal responsibility. This paper explores the spiritual, moral, and socioeconomic dimensions of kaffārah within Yoruba Muslim communities. It highlights how kaffārah contributes to poverty alleviation, wealth redistribution, social solidarity, and economic stimulation, while also identifying challenges such as inadequate religious literacy, economic hardship, and cultural influences. Comparative insights from other Muslim societies are examined to contextualize the Yoruba experience. The study concludes that kaffārah transcends its function as a personal act of atonement, serving as a divinely mandated mechanism of social justice. Recommendations are offered for strengthening awareness, institutionalizing practices, and integrating kaffārah into broader welfare systems to enhance its relevance in contemporary Yoruba society.

Keywords: Kaffārah, Yoruba Muslims, expiation, social justice, poverty alleviation, wealth redistribution, Islamic jurisprudence, communal solidarity

Introduction

Religion plays a central role in shaping moral conduct, social relations, and economic practices across societies. In Islam, divine commandments are not only spiritual obligations but also mechanisms for promoting justice, compassion, and communal wellbeing (Esposito, 2018). Among these, the concept of *kaffārah* occupies a distinctive position as an act of expiation designed to atone for specific transgressions while simultaneously redistributing resources within society (Kamali, 2019). More than a ritual of forgiveness, *kaffārah* embodies a model of social responsibility that transforms personal shortcomings into communal benefits. The Qur'ān and Sunnah provide the basis for *kaffārah*, prescribing compensatory acts such as feeding the poor, clothing the needy, or freeing slaves in situations of broken oaths, missed fasts, or unlawful marital declarations (Qur'ān 2:184–185; 4:92; 5:89; AlBukhari, 2009). These prescriptions not only reinforce accountability before Allah but also ensure that lapses in individual piety result in tangible benefits for vulnerable members of society (Ibn Kathīr, 2003). Hence, *kaffārah* links personal repentance with collective welfare, positioning it as an important tool for social justice in Islam.

Within Yoruba Muslim communities in Southwestern Nigeria, *kaffārah* is understood and practiced in ways that reflect both its Islamic essence and local cultural values. Yoruba traditions of *àjòṣe* (communal solidarity), *àjùmọṣe* (collective responsibility), and *ẹbí* (extended family support) converge with Islamic injunctions, making *kaffārah* a socially embedded practice (Akinrinade, 2020). Feeding the poor during Ramadan or supporting widows and orphans through *kaffārah* obligations has become both a spiritual necessity and a communal act of solidarity (Ogunbado, 2012). Despite its significance, the practice of *kaffārah* among Yoruba Muslims is not without challenges. Economic constraints often limit individuals' ability to fulfill obligations (Sanusi, 2021), while inadequate religious literacy sometimes results in misconceptions about the nature and requirements of *kaffārah* (AbdulRaheem, 2015). Furthermore, cultural influences occasionally substitute prescribed acts with symbolic gestures, diluting the religious essence of the obligation (Adeyemo, 2019). These challenges highlight the need for renewed awareness and institutional frameworks to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of *kaffārah* practices.

This paper therefore examines the socioeconomic implications of *kaffārah* as practiced among Yoruba Muslims. It explores how *kaffārah* functions as a mechanism for social responsibility, addresses poverty and inequality, stimulates local economies, and fosters communal solidarity. Comparative insights from other Muslim societies are considered to contextualize the Yoruba experience, while challenges are critically assessed. Ultimately, the study argues that *kaffārah* is not merely a private spiritual act but also a divine model of social welfare that integrates morality with economic justice.

Conceptual Clarifications

Meaning and Types of Kaffārah in Islam

The word *kaffārah* (كفارة) in Arabic literally means expiation, atonement, or compensation for a sin, mistake, or unfulfilled obligation. In Islamic jurisprudence, *kaffārah* refers to specific acts prescribed by the Shari‘ah to atone for certain transgressions or shortcomings in worship. The concept is rooted in divine mercy, allowing a believer to cleanse himself from errors while restoring spiritual balance. *Kaffārah* is not merely punitive; it serves as a moral and social corrective that strengthens the bond between the servant and Allah.

The Qur’ān highlights *kaffārah* in various contexts, such as expiation for breaking oaths:

فَكَفَّارَتُهُ إِطْعَامُ عَشْرَةِ مَسَاكِينَ مِنْ أَوْسَطِ مَا تُطْعَمُونَ أَوْ كِلِيْنَهُمْ أَوْ تَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ
فَمَنْ لَمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ ثَلَاثَةِ أَيَّامٍ

Its expiation is to feed ten needy people from the average of that which you feed your own families, or to clothe them, or to free a slave. But whoever cannot find [means] must fast for three days (Qur’ān 5:89).

From this, scholars classify *kaffārah* into types such as:

- *KaffāratalYamīn* (Expiation for broken oaths)
- *KaffāratalFiṭr* (Compensation for missed fasts of Ramaḍān)
- *KaffāratalZihār* (Expiation for unlawful marital statements)
- *KaffāratalHajj* (For violations during pilgrimage rituals)

Each type has its conditions, ensuring justice, responsibility, and compassion are upheld.

Qur'ānic and Prophetic Basis for *Kaffārah*

The foundations of *kaffārah* are deeply embedded in the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Allah emphasizes the principle of moral accountability, yet simultaneously provides avenues of forgiveness through compensatory acts. For instance, in relation to *zihār* (a form of pre-Islamic divorce), the Qur'ān states:

وَالَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِنْ نِسَائِهِمْ ثُمَّ يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَتَمَاسَا
 And those who pronounce *zihār* from their wives and then [wish to]
 go back on what they said – then [there must be] the freeing of a
 slave before they touch one another (Qur'ān 58:3).

Prophetic traditions further elaborate on *kaffārah*. For example, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ guided individuals who committed errors during fasting to either feed the poor or fast as expiation (*alBukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, KitābalṢawm*). Such evidences show that *kaffārah* balances personal accountability with communal benefit, transforming mistakes into opportunities for charity.

Yoruba Muslims' Understanding of *Kaffārah*

Among Yoruba Muslims in Southwestern Nigeria, *kaffārah* is not only understood as a spiritual necessity but also as a cultural practice embedded in communal life. Yoruba Muslims often associate *kaffārah* with giving food, clothing, or alms to the poor, especially during *Ramaḍān*. The act is seen as both an obligation and a means of reinforcing *àjòṣe* (communal solidarity).

In practice, the emphasis is often placed on feeding the needy, reflecting both Qur'ānic injunctions and Yoruba cultural values of hospitality and communal responsibility. This localized interpretation shows how Islamic injunctions are harmonized with indigenous values, thereby giving *kaffārah* a socioreligious dimension that extends beyond the individual to the wider Yoruba Muslim community.

***Kaffārah* as a Mechanism for Social Responsibility**

Kaffārah in Islamic jurisprudence functions not only as an expiation for sin but also as a mechanism for redistributing wealth and alleviating hardship within society. The Qur'ān prescribes that Kaffārah for certain transgressions should be fulfilled through feeding the poor, clothing the needy, or freeing slaves:

وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَ فِدْيَةَ طَعَامٍ مِسْكِينٍ

And upon those who are able [to fast, but with hardship] – a ransom [as substitute] of feeding a poor person. (Qur'ān 2:184, Saheeh International)

Among Yoruba Muslims, this principle underscores a communal ethic where individual sin becomes an opportunity to uplift others. Thus, Kaffārah acts as a form of wealth circulation that reduces inequality and strengthens solidarity. Recent studies suggest that such acts of redistribution enhance social cohesion and trust within Muslim communities (Ahmad & Yusuf, 2022).

Economic Implications for Local Communities

The performance of Kaffārah often involves monetary expenditure, such as purchasing food or clothing for distribution. This stimulates local markets by increasing demand for agricultural produce, textiles, and other basic goods. For example, during Ramadan, Yoruba Muslims who perform Kaffārah may buy grains, yam flour, or rice from local farmers and traders. This aligns with findings by Oloyede (2021), who notes that religiously motivated giving contributes significantly to microeconomic stability in Yoruba towns. Hence, Kaffārah is not only a spiritual duty but also an economic driver that supports livelihoods.

Addressing Poverty and Inequality

One of the most direct socioeconomic benefits of Kaffārah lies in its impact on poverty alleviation. By design, Kaffārah prioritizes the poor and vulnerable, ensuring that wealth does not remain concentrated among the elite. The Qur'ān emphasizes this redistributive role when commanding:

لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ

Never will you attain righteousness until you spend from that which you love.” (Qur’ān 3:92, Saheeh International)

This principle finds practical expression in Yoruba Muslim *Kaffārah* practices, where beneficiaries are often widows, orphans, and unemployed youth. In turn, such practices contribute to social justice by bridging the gap between the affluent and the disadvantaged, aligning with contemporary development goals of equity and inclusiveness (UNDP, 2020).

Charity, Redistribution, and Poverty Alleviation

One of the most profound socioeconomic implications of *kaffārah* lies in its contribution to poverty alleviation through structured redistribution of wealth. The Qur’ān repeatedly emphasizes the duty of Muslims to support the less privileged, and *kaffārah* provides a clear mechanism to fulfill this obligation. Allah states: وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَقْرِضُوا اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا *And establish prayer and give zakāh and loan Allah a goodly loan...* (Qur’ān 73:20, Saheeh International).

Although distinct from *zakāh*, *kaffārah* functions in a complementary way by channeling resources toward those most in need. In Yoruba Muslim communities, when individuals pay *kaffārah* in the form of food or clothing, it directly benefits the needy, especially widows, orphans, and the elderly who often depend on communal support. This practice strengthens social solidarity by narrowing the gap between the wealthy and the poor, thereby reducing economic inequalities (Olayiwola, 2019).

Furthermore, *kaffārah* aligns with modern social welfare ideals by redistributing resources in a way that is both obligatory and spiritually rewarding. It is not left to voluntary goodwill alone but is mandated by divine command. In this sense, *kaffārah* can be understood as a divine model of social security — one that integrates moral accountability with economic justice. Scholars such as Kamali (2018) argue that such provisions in Islamic law demonstrate Islam’s foresight in promoting sustainable socioeconomic systems.

***Kaffārah* and the Ethics of Wealth Distribution**

The principle of wealth distribution in Islam is not merely economic but deeply ethical, rooted in justice (‘*adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*). *Kaffārah* serves as a corrective mechanism, ensuring that

when individuals err against divine or social obligations, they compensate society in a way that benefits those at the margins. The Qur’ān notes: ﴿لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ﴾ “*Never will you attain righteousness until you spend from that which you love.*” (Qur’ān 3:92, Saheeh International).

This verse highlights the ethical foundation of wealth redistribution that giving should involve sacrifice, not simply surplus. Within Yoruba Muslim communities, this ethic is visible in how *kaffārah* obligations are often fulfilled with staple foods like rice, beans, or yam, which are not only culturally valued but also necessary for survival. By redistributing these essentials, *kaffārah* ensures that wealth circulates and that no segment of society is entirely excluded from economic wellbeing.

Moreover, *kaffārah* discourages hoarding and excessive materialism. The Yoruba concept of “*àjùmọṣe*” (collective responsibility) resonates strongly with the Islamic injunction of wealth sharing, showing how *kaffārah* blends seamlessly with indigenous moral frameworks. Ethically, this reinforces the idea that wealth is not an individual possession alone but a trust (*amānah*) with societal obligations (Sulaiman, 2021). Hence, *kaffārah* strengthens the moral economy of Yoruba Muslims, where the wealthy are constantly reminded of their duty toward the poor, while the poor gain dignity through communal support.

***Kaffārah* and Social Solidarity among Yoruba Muslims**

Kaffārah is not only an act of worship but also a vital instrument in fostering social solidarity. By its very design, *kaffārah* ensures that resources are redirected from individuals who commit transgressions to those in need, thus creating a cycle of interdependence and compassion. The Qur’ān repeatedly emphasizes collective responsibility, such as in: ﴿وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَى﴾ “*And cooperate in righteousness and piety.*” (Qur’ān 5:2). This verse underpins the idea that the fulfillment of *kaffārah* strengthens communal bonds, as it transforms individual shortcomings into opportunities for collective benefit.

Within Yoruba Muslim communities, *kaffārah* often transcends individual obligation and becomes a shared responsibility. For example, when a person struggles to meet the financial cost of feeding sixty poor people, relatives, friends, or even mosque congregations frequently assist in fulfilling the requirement. This communal participation not only ensures that the act of expiation is

completed but also fosters unity and shared spirituality. Furthermore, kaffārah feeds into the Yoruba cultural ethos of “*ẹbí*” (extended family) and “*àjọ*” (communal contribution). These practices emphasize that one’s problem is not faced alone but is shared with the community. In this way, kaffārah acts as a bridge between Islamic injunctions and Yoruba traditions, reinforcing solidarity. More importantly, it contributes to reducing resentment among the less privileged by reminding them that wealth and care flow towards them through divinely mandated channels (Ibrahim, 2020).

Thus, kaffārah enhances both vertical relationships (between humans and Allah) and horizontal relationships (between humans themselves), creating a holistic framework of solidarity that is both spiritual and social.

Challenges in Practicing Kaffārah among Yoruba Muslims

While kaffārah plays a crucial role in Yoruba Muslim society, its practical implementation faces several challenges. One of the foremost issues is economic hardship. Many Yoruba Muslims live within modest means, with some families struggling to meet daily subsistence needs. In such contexts, fulfilling obligations such as feeding sixty poor people or clothing them can be financially overwhelming. As a result, some individuals either delay the performance of kaffārah or neglect it entirely, thereby compromising its intended spiritual and social benefits (Oladipo, 2019).

Another challenge is inadequate religious literacy. Although Yoruba Muslims are generally devoted to religious observance, not all members possess deep knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence. This sometimes results in confusion about when kaffārah is required, what forms it can take, and how it should be executed. For example, some may believe that simply offering prayers of repentance suffices in place of kaffārah, thereby overlooking its mandatory nature. This gap between knowledge and practice limits the effectiveness of kaffārah in both spiritual and social dimensions.

Cultural influences also present challenges. In Yoruba tradition, reconciliation and restitution often involve symbolic gestures such as offering kola nuts, drinks, or financial compensation. While these may align with communal values, they sometimes lead to the substitution of Islamic kaffārah

with purely cultural practices, especially among Muslims with a syncretic worldview. This blending of practices can dilute the religious essence of *kaffārah* and replace divinely prescribed obligations with cultural alternatives.

In addition, there are logistical challenges, particularly in urban centers. Finding sixty genuinely needy people to feed or clothe can be difficult for individuals who live in relatively developed communities where poverty is less visible. Conversely, in rural areas where poverty is widespread, the challenge is often ensuring that the *kaffārah* is carried out systematically and with sincerity rather than superficially.

The rising commercialization of religious obligations poses another concern. In some cases, religious intermediaries or mosque committees may demand money from individuals to “perform *kaffārah*” on their behalf. While this may provide convenience, it risks turning *kaffārah* into a transaction rather than a personal act of expiation and social responsibility.

These challenges highlight the need for continuous religious education, community guidance, and institutional frameworks to support Yoruba Muslims in fulfilling *kaffārah* as prescribed by Islamic law.

Comparative Insights: *Kaffārah* in Yoruba Islam and Other Muslim Societies

The practice of *kaffārah* among Yoruba Muslims shares similarities with other Muslim societies but also reflects distinctive contextual adaptations. At the global level, *kaffārah* is universally understood as a form of expiation designed to cleanse sins and restore spiritual balance. In regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, Muslims generally fulfill *kaffārah* through well established structures, including zakat foundations, waqf institutions, and state regulated charitable organizations. These institutions make it easier to identify beneficiaries, coordinate feeding programs, and ensure proper execution of *kaffārah*.

In contrast, Yoruba Muslims typically rely on family networks, mosque committees, or personal discretion in carrying out *kaffārah*. This localized approach reinforces community bonds but also exposes the practice to inconsistencies, since it depends heavily on individual interpretation and resources. For example, while a Muslim in Egypt may discharge *kaffārah* by donating to a

recognized charity that distributes food to the poor, a Yoruba Muslim might gather community members or approach a local imam for guidance on feeding or clothing the needy.

Another comparative aspect lies in the intersection of culture and religion. In many Arab societies, *kaffārah* is largely free from cultural embellishments, as the religious prescriptions are followed with minimal interference. However, among Yoruba Muslims, cultural traditions such as offering material tokens for reconciliation may overlap with *kaffārah* obligations. This blending of cultural and religious practices creates a unique experience of *kaffārah* that emphasizes Yoruba communal values alongside Islamic prescriptions.

When compared with South Asian Muslims, especially in India and Pakistan, the Yoruba experience also shows differences in institutional support. In South Asia, madrasa networks and Islamic charities frequently organize largescale iftar programs or communal feeding that serve as avenues for fulfilling *kaffārah*. Yoruba Muslims, however, often perform *kaffārah* on a smaller, more personal scale, targeting known individuals in their immediate environment. This difference underscores the degree to which socioreligious institutions shape the practice of Islamic obligations.

Moreover, the economic dimension cannot be overlooked. In wealthier Muslimmajority countries such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, *kaffārah* is sometimes fulfilled through direct financial transfers to approved charities or via government systems designed to ensure compliance. Yoruba Muslims, who often live in modest economic conditions, may find such practices burdensome and must therefore adapt them to their realities, sometimes reducing the scale or seeking alternative interpretations through their religious leaders.

Despite these differences, the underlying spiritual essence of *kaffārah* remains intact across societies. Whether in Yoruba land or elsewhere, the practice reflects submission to divine will, the pursuit of repentance, and the commitment to social responsibility. However, the Yoruba experience demonstrates how local realitieseconomic, cultural, and institutionalshape the way universal Islamic obligations are understood and practiced.

Conclusion

The practice of *kaffārah* among Yoruba Muslims in SouthWest Nigeria is not merely a ritual obligation but a multidimensional phenomenon that embodies the spiritual, moral, and socioeconomic values of Islamic teaching. Rooted in the Qur'ān and Sunnah, *kaffārah* emphasizes accountability, repentance, and restitution while also serving as a framework for promoting social justice. By mandating acts such as feeding the poor, clothing the needy, and freeing captives, *kaffārah* functions as a religiously grounded mechanism of wealth redistribution and community solidarity.

The socioeconomic implications of *kaffārah* are especially significant in Yoruba Muslim societies where poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality persist. The performance of *kaffārah* ensures that resources flow from the relatively affluent to vulnerable members of the community, thereby alleviating hunger and promoting dignity. At the same time, it strengthens communal bonds by fostering mutual support and cooperation, reflecting Islam's commitment to equity and justice.

Furthermore, the contemporary application of *kaffārah* presents both opportunities and challenges. While the traditional forms of *kaffārah* remain relevant, new socioeconomic realities demand a contextualized interpretation that ensures its continued impact. Issues such as urban poverty, rising unemployment, and modernization require that Yoruba Muslim scholars and leaders provide guidance on effective, transparent, and sustainable practices of *kaffārah* in present times.

In conclusion, *kaffārah*, as practiced among Yoruba Muslims, goes beyond personal expiation of sin; it embodies a form of Islamic social welfare that integrates spirituality with socioeconomic responsibility. This dual dimension positions *kaffārah* as a vital tool in the quest for justice, equity, and community wellbeing in SouthWest Nigeria. The study thus contributes to both Islamic scholarship and socioreligious discourse by highlighting the enduring relevance of *kaffārah* as a bridge between faith and social justice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on the socioeconomic implications of *kaffārah* among Yoruba Muslims, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Awareness and Education:** Islamic scholars, Imams, and Muslim organizations should intensify awareness campaigns on the spiritual and social dimensions of *kaffārah*. Many Muslims in Yoruba communities perform *kaffārah* only as a ritual obligation without fully appreciating its role in poverty alleviation and social justice.
2. **Institutionalizing *Kaffārah* Practices:** Muslim communities and organizations should establish transparent structures or welfare committees to coordinate the collection and distribution of resources given as *kaffārah*. This will ensure that support reaches the genuinely needy and avoids duplication or misuse.
3. **Integration with Modern Social Welfare:** Given the growing socioeconomic challenges in Nigeria, *kaffārah* should be integrated into broader poverty alleviation strategies. Muslim leaders can collaborate with NGOs, zakāt boards, and governmental agencies to extend its impact on hunger, unemployment, and healthcare.
4. **Encouraging Contextual Application:** Islamic jurists and scholars in Yoruba communities should provide contextsensitive interpretations of *kaffārah* to address emerging realities such as urban poverty, digital platforms for donations, and new forms of vulnerability in society.
5. **Promoting Accountability and Transparency:** Community leaders managing *kaffārah* funds or resources should embrace accountability through recordkeeping and public reports. This will build trust and encourage more Muslims to fulfill their obligations sincerely.
6. **Further Research:** Academics and Islamic researchers should conduct empirical studies on the economic impact of *kaffārah* in Yoruba communities. Such studies will provide datadriven insights that can inform policy and religious guidance.

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