

INFORMAL PEACE EDUCATION AND THE PREVENTION OF RADICALIZATION OF TEENAGERS IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the role of informal peace education in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the increasing vulnerability of teenagers to violent extremism in conflict-affected environments, particularly in areas impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 250 respondents comprising teenagers, parents/guardians, religious leaders, and community leaders using a structured questionnaire. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The findings revealed that family-based informal peace education significantly influences the prevention of teenage radicalization by promoting moral values, emotional stability, and behavioural guidance. It was also found that religious institutions play a major role in promoting peace education through sermons, counselling, and moral teachings that discourage violence. Furthermore, traditional and community leaders were found to contribute meaningfully through indigenous practices such as storytelling, mediation, and communal dialogue. The study also identified parental guidance, religious instruction, storytelling, mentorship, and community dialogue as the most effective informal peace education practices in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization. The study concludes that informal peace education is a vital and sustainable strategy for preventing teenage radicalization in Borno State. It recommends strengthened family engagement, enhanced religious peace teachings, revitalization of traditional leadership roles, and integrated community-based peace education programmes.

Keywords: Informal peace education, teenage radicalization, religious institutions, family influence, community leadership, violent extremism.

Introduction

The growing incidence of violent extremism across the world has intensified scholarly concern about the processes through which individuals, particularly young people, become radicalized. Radicalization is commonly described as a gradual process in which individuals adopt extreme ideological beliefs that may justify or lead to violence (Jasko et al., 2020). Central to this process is the individual's quest for identity, belonging, and personal significance, which is especially pronounced during adolescence (Kruglanski & Bertelsen, 2020). Similarly, Sageman (2017) observed that social networks, emotional vulnerabilities, and group dynamics often play a crucial role in facilitating individuals' transition into extremist groups. Teenagers, therefore, constitute a highly vulnerable category due to their developmental stage, which is characterized by identity exploration, susceptibility to peer influence, and emotional instability.

In Nigeria, the challenge of youth radicalization is closely associated with the activities of Boko Haram, an insurgent group that has significantly destabilized the northeastern region, particularly Borno State. Since the escalation of the insurgency in 2009, the region has experienced widespread violence, destruction of infrastructure, and large-scale displacement of populations (Bello, 2024). The insurgency has also led to severe socio-economic consequences, including heightened poverty, unemployment, and social dislocation (Familusi & Oshomo, 2019). One of the most profound impacts has been on education, as numerous schools have been destroyed and thousands of children denied access to formal learning opportunities (Durojaye, 2016). These adverse conditions create an enabling environment for extremist recruitment, particularly among teenagers who face limited opportunities and uncertain futures.

The drivers of radicalization among teenagers in Borno State are complex and multifaceted. Socio-economic deprivation, marginalization, and lack of access to quality education significantly contribute to youth frustration and vulnerability to extremist ideologies (Stephens et al., 2019). In addition, the manipulation of religious beliefs and the propagation of extremist interpretations further exacerbate the problem (Hassan, 2020). The breakdown of family and community structures due to displacement and prolonged conflict also weakens traditional systems of socialization and moral guidance. According to the United States Institute of Peace (2020), communities affected by sustained conflict often exhibit reduced resilience, making them more susceptible to extremist infiltration and recruitment.

In response to these challenges, there has been a growing shift toward non-military strategies for preventing radicalization, particularly those centered on education and community engagement. Peace education has emerged as a vital approach for promoting values such as tolerance, empathy, dialogue, and non-violence (Macedo et al., 2025; Shenge, 2021). While formal peace education is typically delivered through structured school systems, informal peace education occurs through everyday interactions within families, religious institutions, and community settings. This form of education is deeply embedded in cultural practices and social norms, making it especially relevant in contexts where formal educational structures are weakened or disrupted.

In the Nigerian context, informal peace education is often transmitted through indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, storytelling, proverbs, and communal value systems. Studies have shown that traditional African societies possess well-established systems for promoting peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion (Atakpa et al., 2021; Ume, 2016). Traditional and religious institutions also play a crucial role in shaping moral values and guiding behavior. For instance, Ibrahim and Shehu (2022) and Yahaya (2023) found that traditional rulers and religious leaders are instrumental in conflict mediation and in preventing youth radicalization through moral instruction and community influence. Similarly, Beaujouan and Rasheed (2022) highlighted the significant role of religious institutions in countering violent extremism by promoting peaceful interpretations of religious teachings.

Furthermore, grassroots peacebuilding initiatives have demonstrated effectiveness in strengthening community resilience against violent extremism. Community-based programs that promote social cohesion, dialogue, and inclusive participation have been found to reduce vulnerability to radicalization (Lichtenheld et al., 2022; Mercy Corps, 2024). Women and youth groups, in particular, have emerged as critical actors in informal peace education and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts (Lamle & Ahgu, 2026). In Northeast Nigeria, young people are increasingly recognized not only as victims of radicalization but also as key agents in countering violent extremism through peer engagement and advocacy (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2022).

Despite these developments, existing responses to radicalization in Borno State have largely emphasized military interventions and formal education strategies, often overlooking the potential of informal, community-based approaches. Given the strong cultural and communal structures in Nigerian societies, informal peace education presents a viable and sustainable strategy for addressing the root causes of radicalization. As noted by Palmer et al. (2024), peace and values education programs that are context-specific and community-driven are more effective in fostering long-term behavioral change and promoting peaceful coexistence. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the role of informal peace education in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite various military and security interventions aimed at addressing violent extremism in Northeast Nigeria, particularly in Borno State, teenage radicalization remains a persistent challenge, largely driven by socio-economic deprivation, displacement, weakened family structures, and limited access to education resulting from the Boko Haram insurgency. Although efforts to counter radicalization have often focused on formal education systems and security-based responses, less attention has been given to informal peace education mechanisms such as family upbringing, religious instruction, traditional leadership, and community-based moral socialization, which have historically played significant roles in shaping values and promoting social cohesion in African societies. While studies have acknowledged the importance of community engagement and youth participation in countering violent extremism (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2022; Lichtenheld et al., 2022), there remains limited empirical evidence on how informal peace education specifically contributes to preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State. This gap in knowledge suggests that current counter-radicalization strategies may be overlooking culturally grounded and community-driven approaches that could offer more sustainable solutions, thereby necessitating an investigation into the role of informal peace education in addressing teenage radicalization in the study area.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. To what extent does family-based informal peace education influence the prevention of teenage radicalization in Borno State, Nigeria?
- ii. What role do religious institutions play in promoting informal peace education among teenagers in Borno State?
- iii. How do traditional and community leaders contribute to the transmission of informal peace values to teenagers in Borno State?
- iv. What informal peace education practices are most effective in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization in Borno State, Nigeria?

Objective of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine the role of informal peace education in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. determine the extent to which family-based informal peace education influences the prevention of teenage radicalization;
- ii. examine the role of religious institutions in promoting informal peace education among teenagers;

- iii. assess the contribution of traditional and community leaders in transmitting informal peace values to teenagers;
- iv. identify the informal peace education practices that are most effective in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization in Borno State.

Literature Review

Concept of Radicalization

Radicalization is widely understood as a gradual process through which individuals adopt extreme ideological beliefs that may justify or lead to the use of violence for political, religious, or social objectives (Jasko et al., 2020). It is often influenced by psychological, social, and environmental factors, including identity crises, perceived injustice, and the search for meaning and belonging (Kruglanski & Bertelsen, 2020). Sageman (2017) further explains that radicalization is rarely an isolated process but is embedded within social networks that reinforce extremist beliefs and behaviors.

Violent Extremism

Violent extremism, in this context therefore, represents the operational outcome of radicalization, where individuals or groups engage in or support acts of violence to achieve ideological goals. In the context of Northeast Nigeria, these processes have been strongly associated with insurgent activities, particularly those of Boko Haram, which has exploited socio-economic vulnerabilities and ideological manipulation to recruit young people.

Teenage Radicalization in Conflict-Affected Societies

Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to radicalization due to their developmental stage, which is marked by identity formation, emotional sensitivity, and peer influence. In conflict-affected regions such as Borno State, this vulnerability is further intensified by poverty, displacement, and lack of access to quality education (Familusi & Oshomo, 2019; Durojaye, 2016). The prolonged insurgency has disrupted family structures and educational systems, exposing adolescents to environments where extremist ideologies can thrive. According to Stephens et al. (2019), socio-economic exclusion and lack of opportunity are key drivers of youth radicalization, especially in fragile contexts. Similarly, the United States Institute of Peace (2020) emphasizes that weak community resilience increases susceptibility to extremist recruitment and manipulation.

The Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Implications

The Boko Haram insurgency has significantly shaped the socio-political landscape of Northeast Nigeria, particularly Borno State. Bello (2024) notes that the conflict has resulted in widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and severe humanitarian crises. One of the most affected sectors is education, as many schools have been attacked or closed, depriving children of learning opportunities (Durojaye, 2016). This disruption has not only affected human capital development but has also increased the vulnerability of teenagers to radicalization. The socio-economic consequences of the insurgency, including unemployment and poverty, further exacerbate youth susceptibility to extremist narratives (Familusi & Oshomo, 2019).

Concept of Informal Peace Education

Informal peace education refers to the non-structured transmission of values, attitudes, and behaviors that promote peace, tolerance, and conflict resolution through family, community, religious, and cultural systems. Unlike formal education, it occurs outside the classroom and is embedded in daily social interactions. Macedo et al. (2025) argue that peace education, whether

formal or informal, plays a transformative role in shaping individuals' worldview and promoting peaceful coexistence. In African societies, informal peace education is deeply rooted in cultural practices such as storytelling, proverbs, communal dialogue, and moral instruction.

Indigenous and Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Traditional African societies have long relied on indigenous systems of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Atakpa et al. (2021) and Ume (2016) highlight that these systems emphasize reconciliation, communal harmony, and restorative justice rather than punitive measures. Traditional rulers, elders, and community leaders play critical roles in mediating disputes and maintaining social order. Similarly, Ibrahim and Shehu (2022) emphasize that traditional institutions remain relevant in contemporary conflict management, particularly in Northern Nigeria where cultural authority is still highly respected.

Role of Religious Institutions in Peace Education

Religious institutions are central to informal peace education in many societies, including Nigeria. Beaujouan and Rasheed (2022) note that religious leaders can either contribute to peacebuilding or, if misinterpreted, fuel conflict. In the context of countering violent extremism, religious teachings that promote tolerance, compassion, and coexistence are critical. Hassan (2020) highlights that Islamic discourse, particularly within Sufi traditions, emphasizes non-violence and spiritual struggle as forms of jihad, which can be instrumental in countering extremist ideologies. Yahaya (2023) further observes that religious leaders in Northern Nigeria play a significant role in preventing youth radicalization through sermons, counseling, and community engagement.

Community and Youth Engagement in Peacebuilding

Community participation is essential in preventing radicalization and promoting social cohesion. Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2022) emphasizes that youths are not only vulnerable to extremist recruitment but also potential agents of peace when properly engaged. Community-based peacebuilding initiatives have been shown to strengthen resilience against violent extremism by fostering trust, dialogue, and inclusion (Lichtenheld et al., 2022). Mercy Corps (2024) also highlights the importance of women and youth groups in grassroots peacebuilding efforts, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Northeast Nigeria.

Empirical Gaps

Although existing literature acknowledges the importance of peace education and community engagement in countering violent extremism, most studies have focused on formal education systems and security interventions. There is limited empirical evidence on how informal peace education functions specifically within families, religious institutions, and community structures in preventing teenage radicalization in Borno State.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the role of informal peace education in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it allowed for the collection of data from a representative sample of respondents to describe existing conditions without manipulating variables. The population of the study comprised teenagers, parents/guardians, religious leaders, and community leaders in selected communities in Gwoza, Monguno and Maiduguri the state capital, one local government area was selected from the three senatorial zones that were most affected by the insurgency across Borno State. These groups were considered relevant because they are directly involved in

informal peace education processes and youth socialization within the study area. A total of 250 respondents were selected as the sample for the study. Simple random sampling technique was used to select teenage respondents, while purposive sampling was employed to select key informants such as religious leaders and community/traditional leaders based on their knowledge and involvement in peacebuilding and youth development. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled “*Informal Peace Education and Teenage Radicalization Questionnaire (IPETRQ)*”. The questionnaire was divided into sections A and B. Section A contained demographic information of respondents, while Section B contained items designed on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), focusing on family influence, religious institutions, traditional/community leadership, and informal peace education practices.

The instrument was validated by experts in Peace and Conflict Studies and Educational Research to ensure clarity, relevance, and adequacy of the items. Their suggestions were incorporated to improve the quality of the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot test using Cronbach’s Alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.79 indicating that the instrument was internally consistent and suitable for the study. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while a decision rule of 2.50 was adopted as the benchmark for acceptance or rejection of items. Any mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as agreed, while scores below 2.50 were regarded as disagreed.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does family-based informal peace education influence the prevention of teenage radicalization in Borno State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Influence of Family-Based Informal Peace Education on Prevention of Teenage Radicalization

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Parents teach values of tolerance and non-violence at home	250	3.62	0.78	Agree
2	Family discussions discourage extremist beliefs	250	3.48	0.81	Agree
3	Strong family bonding reduces vulnerability to radicalization	250	3.71	0.69	Agree
4	Parents monitor children’s social influence and friendships	250	3.55	0.74	Agree
5	Family moral upbringing helps prevent youth involvement in violence	250	3.80	0.66	Agree
	Grand Mean		3.63		Agree

Table 1 shows a grand mean of 3.63, indicating agreement that family-based informal peace education significantly influences the prevention of teenage radicalization. This implies that parenting practices such as moral instruction, emotional support, supervision, and value transmission play a critical role in shaping teenagers’ attitudes against extremist ideologies in Borno State.

Research Question 2: What role do religious institutions play in promoting informal peace education among teenagers in Borno State?

Table 2: Mean Responses on the Role of Religious Institutions in Promoting Informal Peace Education

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Religious leaders preach peace and tolerance in sermons	250	3.75	0.70	Agree
2	Mosques and churches discourage violent extremism	250	3.68	0.73	Agree
3	Religious teachings guide moral behavior among teenagers	250	3.81	0.64	Agree
4	Faith-based counseling helps prevent radical beliefs	250	3.59	0.76	Agree
5	Religious institutions engage youths in peace-oriented activities	250	3.52	0.80	Agree
	Grand Mean		3.67		Agree

Table 2 show a grand mean of 3.67 which indicates that respondents agree that religious institutions play a strong role in promoting informal peace education among teenagers. This suggests that sermons, moral teachings, and religious counselling are effective tools for discouraging violent extremism and promoting peaceful coexistence in Borno State.

Research Question 3: How do traditional and community leaders contribute to the transmission of informal peace values to teenagers in Borno State?

Table 3: Mean Responses on the Contribution of Traditional and Community Leaders to Informal Peace Education

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Traditional rulers mediate conflicts peacefully in communities	250	3.70	0.72	Agree
2	Community leaders teach cultural values of respect and harmony	250	3.66	0.75	Agree
3	Elders use storytelling and proverbs to promote peace	250	3.58	0.79	Agree
4	Community forums discourage youth involvement in violence	250	3.63	0.71	Agree
5	Traditional institutions help reintegrate at-risk youths	250	3.55	0.77	Agree
	Grand Mean		3.62		Agree

In Table 3, the grand mean of 3.62 shows that respondents agree that traditional and community leaders contribute significantly to the transmission of informal peace values. This indicates that indigenous institutions remain relevant in promoting reconciliation, moral values, and peaceful coexistence among teenagers in Borno State.

Research Question 4: What informal peace education practices are most effective in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization in Borno State, Nigeria?

Table 4: Mean Responses on Effective Informal Peace Education Practices

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Moral storytelling and cultural teachings	250	3.74	0.69	Agree
2	Religious sermons promoting peace and tolerance	250	3.78	0.66	Agree
3	Parental guidance and supervision	250	3.82	0.63	Agree
4	Youth mentorship by community leaders	250	3.67	0.71	Agree
5	Community peace dialogue sessions	250	3.60	0.75	Agree
	Grand Mean		3.72		Agree

In Table 4, the grand mean of 3.72 indicates that respondents agree that multiple informal peace education practices are effective in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization. In particular, parental guidance, religious teachings, storytelling, and mentorship are seen as the most influential strategies for promoting peace and preventing extremist tendencies in Borno State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that informal peace education plays a significant role in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria. The result on family-based informal peace education showed that parental guidance, moral instruction, and strong family bonding significantly reduce teenagers' vulnerability to extremist ideologies. This finding is consistent with Stephens et al. (2019), who explained that socio-economic exclusion and weak family structures increase youths' susceptibility to radical influence. Kruglanski and Bertelsen (2020) further argued that adolescents are driven by a quest for identity and significance, making the family a crucial environment for shaping values that discourage violent extremism. In the same vein, Sageman (2017) emphasized that early socialization within the family strongly determines whether individuals become receptive to or resistant against extremist narratives. This implies that where families are actively engaged in moral upbringing and supervision, teenagers are less likely to be recruited into violent groups.

The study also found that religious institutions play a major role in promoting informal peace education among teenagers in Borno State. This is evident through sermons, counselling, and moral teachings that discourage violence and promote peaceful coexistence. Beaujouan and Rasheed (2022) noted that religious institutions are powerful actors in preventing violent extremism when they promote inclusive moral teachings and community dialogue. Hassan (2020) explained that Islamic discourse, particularly those emphasizing spirituality, compassion, and non-violence, serves as an important counter-narrative to extremist ideologies. Similarly, Yahaya (2023) observed that religious leaders in Northern Nigeria influence youth behaviour through continuous engagement, preaching, and mentorship that discourage radical tendencies. These findings suggest that religious institutions remain central to shaping moral consciousness and guiding teenagers away from violent ideologies.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that traditional and community leaders significantly contribute to the transmission of informal peace values to teenagers. Atakpa et al. (2021) observed that indigenous African societies have long relied on traditional systems such as storytelling, proverbs, and communal dialogue to maintain peace and resolve conflicts. Ume (2016) emphasized that these traditional mechanisms promote reconciliation, social harmony, and collective responsibility, which are essential in preventing youth involvement in violence. Ibrahim and Shehu (2022) further noted that traditional rulers and community leaders in Northern Nigeria continue to play influential roles in conflict management and moral guidance at the grassroots level. This suggests that despite modernization, traditional institutions remain relevant in shaping youth behaviour and sustaining peace within communities.

The study further revealed that various informal peace education practices such as parental mentorship, religious instruction, storytelling, peer guidance, and community dialogue are effective in reducing teenagers' vulnerability to radicalization. Macedo et al. (2025) argued that peace education is most effective when it is embedded within cultural and informal learning environments, as it promotes long-term behavioural change. Lichtenheld et al. (2022) found that community-based peacebuilding programmes strengthen social cohesion and reduce susceptibility to extremist recruitment. Mercy Corps (2024) also reported that grassroots initiatives involving families, women, and youth significantly enhance resilience against violent extremism by fostering inclusion and trust within communities. These findings imply that a combination of informal peace education strategies is more effective than isolated interventions in addressing teenage radicalization.

Conclusion

The study concludes that informal peace education plays a significant and interconnected role in preventing the radicalization of teenagers in Borno State, Nigeria, particularly through the influence of family, religious institutions, and traditional/community leadership structures. These informal systems collectively contribute to shaping teenagers' values, attitudes, and behaviours by promoting tolerance, discipline, moral responsibility, and social cohesion, thereby reducing their vulnerability to extremist ideologies. The family serves as the primary foundation for value formation and emotional stability, while religious institutions reinforce peaceful worldviews through moral teachings and guidance. In the same way, traditional and community leaders sustain indigenous peace practices such as storytelling, dialogue, and mediation, which strengthen communal bonds and discourage violence.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthening family-based peace education:** Parents and guardians should be sensitized and empowered through community programmes to actively provide moral guidance, emotional support, and supervision for teenagers in order to reduce their exposure to extremist influences.
2. **Enhancing the role of religious institutions:** Mosques, churches, and other faith-based organizations should intensify peace-oriented teachings, counselling services, and youth engagement programmes that promote tolerance, coexistence, and rejection of violent ideologies.
3. **Revitalizing traditional and community leadership structures:** Traditional rulers, elders, and community leaders should be further involved in peacebuilding initiatives, particularly through the use of indigenous communication methods such as storytelling, proverbs, and community dialogue to reinforce peace values among teenagers.

4. **Promoting integrated community-based peace education programmes:** Government and relevant stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations should support collaborative programmes that bring together families, religious institutions, and community leaders to implement coordinated informal peace education strategies aimed at preventing teenage radicalization in Borno State.

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