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Religious Extremism as Symbolic Domination: Mosque Communities and Socio-Economic Reconstruction in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: This study examines religious extremism in conflict-affected societies in Sub-Saharan Africa as a form of symbolic domination within the religious field and explores the extent to which local religious communities can contribute to socio-economic reconstruction. This study employs a qualitative, document-based approach. Data were collected through the analysis of African liberation theology literature, studies on religious extremism in Africa, official reports from international institutions, and selected credible online media sources. The data were analyzed using thematic-critical analysis, with particular attention to the concepts of symbolic domination, habitus, field, symbolic capital, and community-based social reconstruction. The study finds that religious extremism operates not only through physical violence but also through symbolic domination, whereby extremist actors seek to monopolize religious interpretation, legitimize violence, and reshape collective dispositions under conditions of poverty, exclusion, and state fragility. The study also shows that extremism deepens structural suffering by disrupting livelihoods, weakening solidarity, and paralyzing grassroots survival creativity. At the same time, the religious field remains open to contestation, and mosque-based communities may serve as spaces of resistance, moral protection, peacebuilding, and socio-economic recovery. These findings suggest that efforts to prevent violent extremism should move beyond military and security-centered approaches by strengthening local religious communities as social and economic actors. The study contributes to ongoing debates on religion and violence by highlighting the importance of community-based religious infrastructures in promoting resilience, rehabilitation, and bottom-up reconstruction in conflict-affected settings.

Keywords: Community reconstruction; mosque communities; religious extremism; structural suffering; symbolic domination.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji ekstremisme agama di masyarakat yang dilanda konflik di Afrika Sub-Sahara sebagai bentuk dominasi simbolik dalam ranah keagamaan, serta mengeksplorasi sejauh mana komunitas keagamaan lokal dapat berkontribusi pada rekonstruksi sosial-ekonomi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis dokumen. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis literatur teologi pembebasan Afrika, studi tentang ekstremisme agama di Afrika, laporan resmi dari lembaga internasional, serta sumber media daring terpilih yang kredibel. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik-kritis, dengan perhatian khusus pada konsep dominasi simbolik, habitus, bidang, modal simbolik, dan rekonstruksi sosial berbasis komunitas. Studi ini menemukan bahwa ekstremisme agama beroperasi tidak hanya melalui kekerasan fisik tetapi juga melalui dominasi simbolik, di mana aktor ekstremis berusaha memonopoli interpretasi agama, melegitimasi kekerasan, dan membentuk kembali disposisi kolektif di bawah kondisi kemiskinan, eksklusi, dan kerentanan negara. Studi ini juga menunjukkan bahwa ekstremisme memperparah penderitaan struktural dengan mengganggu mata pencaharian, melemahkan solidaritas, dan melumpuhkan kreativitas bertahan hidup di tingkat akar rumput. Di saat yang sama, ranah keagamaan tetap terbuka untuk perdebatan, dan komunitas berbasis masjid dapat berfungsi sebagai ruang perlawanan, perlindungan moral, pembangunan perdamaian, serta pemulihan sosial-ekonomi. Temuan-temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa upaya pencegahan ekstremisme kekerasan harus melampaui pendekatan yang berpusat pada militer dan keamanan dengan memperkuat komunitas keagamaan lokal sebagai aktor sosial dan ekonomi. Studi ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan yang sedang berlangsung mengenai agama dan kekerasan dengan menyoroti pentingnya infrastruktur keagamaan berbasis

komunitas dalam mempromosikan ketahanan, rehabilitasi, dan rekonstruksi dari bawah ke atas di lingkungan yang terdampak konflik.

Kata kunci: Dominasi simbolik; ekstremisme religius; komunitas masjid; penderitaan struktural; rekonstruksi komunitas.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Sub-Saharan Africa has undergone a dramatic transformation in its landscape of religion-based violence. A report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that the region has emerged as a new global epicenter of extremism, with 48 percent of global terrorism-related deaths in 2021 occurring in this area. Since 2017, at least 4,155 attacks have been documented, resulting in 18,417 fatalities across eight African countries, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Somalia. Notably, 92 percent of new recruits to extremist groups joined for economic reasons, particularly the need for livelihoods, while religious motivations declined significantly by 57 percent compared to the 2017 report. These findings demonstrate that extremism in Africa cannot be reduced merely to a theological issue; rather, it intertwines with socio-economic crises, human rights violations, fragile social contracts, and state failure to provide basic services (UNDP, 2023).

This reality reveals that violence carried out in the name of religion unfolds within societies that have long endured structural vulnerability. Jean-Marc Ela (1980) describes this condition as *le cri de l'homme africain*, the cry of the African human being trapped in a situation of "living in death." In his reflection on Tokombéré, a region in Mayo-Sava, Northern Cameroon, where he served as a priest and transformed the area into a socio-theological laboratory, Ela shows that land, water, and food constitute matters of life and death (Ela, 1990). In his subsequent works, he argues that exploitative state penetration and extractive accumulation pathways that drain rural communities exacerbate structural poverty (Ela, 1994). Yet Jean-Marc Ela (1998) also emphasizes the presence of social innovation as a form of Black African renaissance, highlighting the capacity of grassroots communities to respond to crisis through collective creativity.

The concept of bricolage becomes crucial in this regard. Yao Assogba (1999) defines bricolage as an art of living that reactualizes technological memory and mobilizes the full range of creative potential that enables Africans to imagine relevant responses to life's challenges in contexts where survival constitutes a daily struggle. Bricolage does not merely represent an adaptive strategy; it forms part of the dynamic of society in which social imagination operates creatively. African societies do not stand solely as victims of structure; they also act as subjects who produce survival strategies.

However, contemporary conditions reveal a tragic paradox. In several conflict-affected regions, communities that had previously struggled primarily with economic hardship now confront forms of intra-communal violence legitimized in the name of religion. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) instrumentalize religious symbols to justify violence. This transformation cannot be separated from the infiltration of transnational fundamentalist currents, which, in several conflict-affected Muslim settings, have challenged the diverse character of local Islam and, particularly in parts of northern Cameroon and northern Nigeria, weakened traditions associated with Sufi tolerance. Ruth Marshall-Fratani and Didier Peclard (2002) observe that, in many African contexts, religion has undergone a strong process of subjectivation, in which faith becomes an arena of identity formation and power contestation.

From the sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (1970), religion participates in the reproduction of social structure through symbolic systems that shape schemes of perception, evaluation, and action. A correspondence exists between structures of power and mental structures mediated by symbolic systems. When individuals interpret these symbolic systems under contradictory existential conditions, the same religious message can produce divergent, even destructive, social effects. In other words, religious extremism does not simply reflect doctrinal deviation; it results from

the dialectic between unequal social structures and mental structures subjected to symbolic manipulation.

Previous studies suggest that religious extremism is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by absolutist truth claims, rejection of pluralism, doctrinal manipulation, and, in some cases, the legitimation of violence in pursuit of ideological goals (A. M. Ismail, Jamir Singh, & Mujani, 2025; Pratt, 2021; Saada, 2023). The literature also indicates that extremism can emerge across various religious and regional contexts, often in relation to socio-political exclusion, governance crises, identity conflicts, and broader processes of radical communication and mobilization (Esposito, 2015; Hassan, 2022; Subedi & Garnett, 2020; Yusof et al., 2017). In response, scholars increasingly emphasize preventive strategies grounded in education, diversity affirmation, legal regulation, and community-based interventions, rather than relying solely on coercive security measures (Aubaevich et al., 2021; Bidova, Aishanova, Ganaeva, Mucalov, & Dadaev, 2016; Seitakhmetova, Aliyarov, Zhandossova, Tolen, & Nurov, 2024). This broader scholarship provides a useful conceptual framework for examining how religious extremism emerges in Sub-Saharan Africa and why its local dynamics necessitate more context-sensitive analysis.

Studies on religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa reveal at least three dominant analytical tendencies. First, security and counterterrorism approaches position extremism as a threat to national and regional stability. Studies within this category emphasize the escalation of violence, its implications for foreign policy, and its impact on national integration and sustainable development. Ismail (2013) and Dowd (2016) view radicalization in West Africa as a regional and international security issue that necessitates strategic policy responses. Haruna (2022) and Juma and Sabala (2024) highlight the growing threats posed by Boko Haram and al-Shabaab to regional security. Mshelia (2024) and Onimhawo and Ottuh (2007) link extremism to national disintegration and the erosion of social cohesion. Within this framework, scholars primarily understand extremism as a threat to the state, and they propose solutions oriented toward military strategies, security policies, and early detection mechanisms such as early warning systems (Sambaiga, 2022). This security focus often marginalizes the socio-economic realities of grassroots communities that constitute the arenas of recruitment and reproduction of extremism.

Second, ideological-theological approaches concentrate on doctrinal transformation and the communication of radical ideology. Hexham (2002) maps religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa as a phenomenon influenced by transnational puritanism and fundamentalism. Hassan (2022) demonstrates how actors can reconstruct religion as a security threat through doctrinal reinterpretation, even within extremist Christian movements. Ottuh and Erhabor (2022) examine the trajectory of radical Islamism and the human rights violations accompanying it. Chiluwa et al. (2020) show how extremist narratives circulate through religious discourse and media, shaping frameworks that legitimize violence. While this approach clarifies mechanisms of ideological radicalization, it often treats religion as the primary causal variable without deeply connecting it to the material conditions and existential crises experienced by affected communities.

Third, socio-structural and political-economic approaches interpret extremism as a product of inequality, marginalization, and governance failure. This perspective resonates closely with African liberation theology articulated by Jean-Marc Ela (Ela, 1980, 1990, 1998), which situates religion within the context of structural suffering and the survival struggles of the rural poor. Studies demonstrate that poverty, unemployment, and human rights violations significantly contribute to recruitment into extremist groups (Haruna, 2022; Mshelia, 2024). Nevertheless, although this approach acknowledges socio-economic factors as critical determinants, relatively few studies explicitly analyze the capacity of local religious communities to act as agents of social reconstruction.

Existing literature positions religion in two extreme roles: either as a security threat or as a source of ideological radicalization. Although socio-structural approaches have opened space to interpret extremism as a symptom of social crisis, few studies explore the ambivalence of religion as an arena of both reproduction and resistance. Scholars rarely integrate African liberation theology, grassroots social creativity, and symbolic sociology to explain how religious communities can function as spaces

of protection, solidarity, and socio-economic renaissance amid extremism. This article addresses that gap by positioning religion not merely as a source of violent legitimation but as a field of meaning contestation that communities can reclaim to restore social dynamics. Rather than focusing solely on extremism as a security issue, this study examines the relationship among structural suffering, symbolic instrumentalization of religion, and the potential of religious communities to rebuild fragmented social life.

This research aims to analyze how religious extremism may operate as a symbolic practice that reproduces social violence within conflict-affected societies in Sub-Saharan Africa and to examine the extent to which local religious communities may function as agents of socio-economic reconstruction amid crisis. The study focuses on two primary dimensions: first, how actors instrumentalize religious symbols and doctrines within social arenas marked by structural inequality; and second, how religious assemblies or communities may reinterpret religion as a source of solidarity, protection, and social renewal.

This research draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, which conceptualizes religion as part of a symbolic system involved in the reproduction of social structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Within this framework, religion can be examined as a field in which various actors compete to accumulate symbolic capital and secure legitimacy over truth claims. From this perspective, religious extremism may be explored as a form of symbolic domination, namely a process through which actors seek to impose a particular interpretation of texts and doctrines as authoritative truth to influence collective habitus and shape dispositions toward violent action. The correspondence between unequal social structures and mental structures internalized through habitus provides an analytical basis for examining why the same religious message may produce different social practices, depending on actors' positions within the field and the distribution of symbolic capital they control.

This article proposes that extremism should not be viewed solely as theological deviation, but also examined in relation to power struggles within the religious field, particularly under conditions of poverty, social exclusion, and crisis of state legitimacy. From this perspective, when extremist actors gain symbolic authority, they may shape schemes of perception and action that help legitimize violence as a form of piety. At the same time, Bourdieu's framework suggests that the religious field remains dynamic and open to contestation. This study therefore explores whether local religious communities that possess social capital and moral legitimacy can reclaim symbolic authority and help redirect collective habitus toward practices of solidarity, cooperation, and social protection.

2. Method

This study takes as its unit of analysis religious symbolic practices within the context of religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the relationship between the instrumentalization of religious doctrine and the social dynamics of Muslim communities affected by conflict in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria. The analysis focuses on the construction of religious meaning, forms of symbolic domination, and the potential of religious communities to act as agents of social reconstruction. The research unit does not consist of isolated individuals; rather, it examines discursive practices and symbolic structures operating within religious and social fields.

This research employs a qualitative approach. The study selects this approach because it does not aim to measure the prevalence of a phenomenon; instead, it seeks to understand in depth the relationship among religion, symbolic power, and the reproduction of social structure in the context of extremism. A qualitative approach enables the exploration of meanings, interpretations, and conceptual dynamics that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables. In addition, this research adopts a theoretical-analytical orientation by integrating African liberation theology and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology in order to construct a conceptual argument concerning the ambivalence of religion as an arena of domination and social transformation.

The data sources rely entirely on primary and secondary documents relevant to the study's theme. The primary documents analyzed include Jean-Marc Ela's works, namely *Le cri de l'homme africain* (Ela, 1980), *Innovations sociales et renaissance de l'Afrique noire* (Ela, 1998), *Quand l'État pénètre en brousse* (Ela,

1990), and *Afrique. L'irruption des pauvres* (Ela, 1994). The study draws the concept of bricolage from Yao Assogba's work (Assogba, 1999). It derives perspectives on symbolic sociology and social reproduction from Pierre Bourdieu, particularly *La reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Secondary documents consist of literature on religious extremism in Africa drawn from peer-reviewed academic journal articles, credible online media sources, and official reports from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023).

The researcher collected data through document analysis using a literature selection procedure based on thematic relevance and theoretical contribution to the research focus. The researcher selected documents according to three criteria: first, direct relevance to African liberation theology and the concept of structural suffering; second, contribution to the analysis of religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa; and third, theoretical significance in explaining the relationship between religion and the reproduction of social structure. The researcher conducted the collection process through identification, classification, and close reading of texts in order to extract conceptual categories, theoretical propositions, and argumentative patterns related to symbolic domination, habitus, and the religious field.

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic-critical analysis. The analytical stages included: first, data reduction through coding of key concepts such as symbolic domination, the instrumentalization of religion, social bricolage, and community renaissance; second, categorization based on Bourdieu's theoretical framework concerning habitus, field, and symbolic capital; and third, relational interpretation to identify how these texts explain both reproduction and resistance within the religious field. Through this analytical process, the study constructs a conceptual synthesis that explains extremism as a practice of symbolic domination while simultaneously identifying the potential of religious communities to act as agents of social transformation in contexts of crisis.

3. Results

Religious Extremism as a Practice of Symbolic Domination in the Social Field

Religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa operates as a practice of symbolic domination that contests interpretive authority and imposes new moral boundaries in the name of religious truth. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) present themselves as holders of the highest legitimacy, then produce rigid social classifications—who counts as a "true believer," who qualifies as a "hypocrite," and who becomes an "infidel"—in order to subdue communities. This logic of *takfir* appears in internal narratives that target "moderate" Muslims as *mécréants* while claiming the status of *les vrais pratiquants*, thereby transforming differences in religious practice into justifications for intra-communal violence. This process reflects a struggle over symbolic capital within the religious field, as extremist groups convert interpretation into a legitimate source of power and compel collective habitus to conform to their version of orthodoxy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). The literature on extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa likewise notes that doctrinal purification and claims to exclusive truth function as central media for legitimizing violence, both in Islamist movements and in certain configurations of other religious extremisms in Africa (Hassan, 2022; Hexham, 2002; Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022).

Symbolic domination does not remain confined to discourse; it operates through social discipline and the ritualization of violence. Video recordings of Boko Haram analyzed by Voice of America show how the group forces villagers in Nigeria to witness public floggings, compels mass participation, and then executes several individuals while declaring, "We have carried out God's punishment," even as victims' blood continues to flow (VOA, 2017). This practice demonstrates how actors present violence as a legitimate religious act, thereby restructuring moral norms and collective fear through symbols of piety. A similar pattern appears in ethnographic fragments documented in VOA reports: a man refuses to consume *aqiqah* meat because his own father slaughtered the animal, whom he labels *khoufar*, and then demands that his wife also refuse; a *combattant du marabout* threatens a young man merely because he considers video games to violate the moral order he seeks to impose. These examples reveal

mechanisms of symbolic domination at the micro level: religious classifications sever family ties, undermine traditional authority, and normalize violence as moral correction, thereby pushing community habitus to accept violence as something "normal" and "religiously meritorious."

This symbolic domination unfolds within an ecosystem of violence that continuously reproduces and transforms itself, even as leadership figures change. Reuters reported that ISWAP claimed Abubakar Shekau died around May 18, 2021, after being cornered in battle and detonating himself, an event that illustrates a war of legitimacy among jihadist factions within the same field (Reuters, 2021). Such contestation does not end violence; it often shifts toward consolidation of power and strategic repositioning. An attack allegedly carried out by Boko Haram in Yobe in early September 2024 killed at least 81 people, according to local officials, who reported that assailants arrived on dozens of motorcycles and burned homes and shops (CNN, 2020). Incidents of this kind show that extremist actors sustain symbolic domination through their capacity to produce collective fear and control social space, while religious symbols function as a language that renders violence "meaningful" and "justified."

Structural contexts reinforce the effectiveness of this symbolic domination, particularly because recruitment and obedience do not rely solely on theological motives. A 2017 UNDP report, based on nearly 2,200 interviews in eight African countries, found that the expectation of employment opportunities constituted the primary driver of recruitment, while experiences of rights violations and abusive treatment by security forces also significantly motivated involvement in extremist groups (UNDP, 2017). In Bourdieu's terms, objective conditions of vulnerability create opportunities for extremist actors to monopolize symbolic capital through promises of salvation, identity, and "moral order," then implant schemes of perception that transform violence into actions that feel legitimate. This study therefore interprets extremism as a practice of symbolic domination that converts interpretation into authority, authority into obedience, and obedience into violence institutionalized within social practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Hassan, 2022; Hexham, 2002; Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022).

"The Cry of the African" and the Stagnation of Social Dynamics: Religion in the Context of Structural Suffering

Religious extremism intensifies the condition of structural suffering that Jean-Marc Ela describes as *le cri de l'homme africain*, a state of "living in death" that traps African people in cycles of poverty, food insecurity, and fragile social protection (Ela, 1980). Ela portrays African life within a social landscape in which land, water, and food determine survival, while the state appears not as a protector that restores dignity but as a force that "penetrates the bush" and deepens exploitation through accumulation pathways that burden rural communities (Ela, 1990, 1994). Extremism accelerates this preexisting suffering because armed violence confines the living space of the poor, destroys subsistence activities, and transforms economic uncertainty into a permanent state of emergency. Restrictions on mobility, market closures, curfews, the closure of the Nigeria–Chad–Cameroon border, and bans on farming near frontline zones effectively suffocate the economic circulation of grassroots communities. Repeated practices of looting, rape, murder, kidnapping, and arson add psychological trauma while simultaneously severing production and distribution chains of basic necessities, rendering life *chimérique*, impossible and unstable (UNICEF, 2020).

Structural suffering strikes most harshly those at the bottom who depend on smallholder agriculture, petty trade, and everyday practices of *débrouillardise* for survival. Landless farmers rent plots and are often compelled to cultivate cash crops such as cotton, while food crops needed for direct consumption become marginalized. The rainy season lasts only about three months, harvest yields remain low, food insecurity and epidemics frequently occur, and trans-migrant bandits seize assets precisely when families struggle to survive. This situation reinforces Ela's depiction of layered exclusion and impoverishment in rural life, where communities confront "useless and tragic deaths" amid weak state protection and strong predation (Ela, 1980, 1994). Religious extremism adds a new layer of suffering because violence not only takes lives but also seizes the most elementary opportunities for living: the opportunity to plant, trade, herd, and move freely.

Extremism produces economic stagnation by destroying market infrastructure and drastically altering the price structure of basic goods. Suicide bombings at the Mémé market in Mayo-Sava, Nigeria—a major livestock market—along with the relocation and decline of Mora market after four attacks, and the disappearance of the Banki livestock market, the Amchidé market, and the Limani customs post, which were described as *rasés de la carte*, illustrate this pattern (Hamdy A., 2020). The collapse of these market spaces halts small-scale occupations that sustain daily survival and forces informal workers to disperse to major cities such as Douala, Yaoundé, Lagos, Abuja, and Ndjamena. Those unable to migrate remain trapped in a thin line between begging and dependence on humanitarian aid. This chain of processes reveals a form of impoverishment that is both structural and situational: an already fragile informal economy collapses under security disruptions, so poverty no longer manifests as chronic deprivation alone but becomes an acute and recurring crisis.

This stagnation also appears in the breakdown of transportation networks and livelihoods that depend on daily mobility. Night travel bans between and within cities after 6:00 p.m. undermine the livelihoods of transport-sector *bricoleurs*, including intercity drivers, loaders, chauffeurs, and "motorboys" in Cameroon. The economic consequences include immediate income decline, rising transportation costs, and increasing prices of essential goods (Hamdy A., 2020). Secondary economic chains suffer as well, including small traders operating at informal toll points and roadside stalls that rely on traffic flow. Drivers of informal "clandos" in Mora, Cameroon, for example, cannot reach Maroua at night, which reduces working hours and income (Magrin & Montclos, 2018). These mechanisms demonstrate how extremism generates poverty not only through direct attacks but also through systematic mobility restrictions.

Price inflation further reveals how insecurity transforms a subsistence economy into a costly economy that punishes the poor. The collapse of the *zouazoua* supply chain—cheap fuel widely used due to limited gas stations after displacement from Banki and Kerawa in Central Africa—illustrates this shift. Fuel that normally cost around 350 CFA per liter in Mora, and even 200 CFA in Kerawa or Amchidé (in Chad), became scarce, forcing people to travel up to 250 kilometers to obtain it. Transportation costs increased, and intra-city fares rose from 100 to 200 CFA. Goods previously available in Banki, located 27 kilometers from Mora, had to be sourced from distances of approximately 250 kilometers, sharply increasing logistical burdens. Raw eggs that once cost 75 CFA rose to 125 CFA; powdered sugar surged from 17,000 CFA to 58,000 CFA in June 2015 before fluctuating between 36,000 and 58,000 CFA; cooking oil increased from 350 CFA per liter in 2013 to about 1,000 CFA; and millet prices rose due to declining cultivation, with red *coro* millet in Mora increasing from 150 CFA at harvest time to 350 CFA. Restrictions on fishing activities in Lake Chad and limitations on livestock routes further exacerbated meat and fish scarcity (UNESCO, 2022). These data show that poverty involves not only low income but also the widening gap between basic commodity prices and the purchasing capacity of marginalized communities in Africa.

These structural pressures erode patterns of community solidarity and generate forms of internal displacement that transform citizens into "refugees in their own country." Mandara families fleeing attacks in Kerawa, Amchidé, and Nigeria relocate to Mora, where they crowd into households that themselves lack economic capacity. The emergence of *hommes errants*, homeless families, and *réfugiés-nationaux* who endure months of abandonment while surviving through improvised and accidental strategies illustrates this condition. Displaced residents often reside in stadiums, schools, or public buildings and receive only minimal provisions of beans or corn for survival (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021). Extremism thus transforms suffering into a totalizing experience: it disrupts food production, eliminates income, severs social networks, and drives forced migration that weakens communal cohesion. Ela situates this reality within his critique of the state and structural poverty, which renders the poor as "those cast aside" within unequal development landscapes (Ela, 1994). Extremist violence intensifies social pressure and overwhelms traditional solidarity networks.

This condition suppresses the community's capacity for social creativity, which Yao Assogba conceptualizes as bricolage. Assogba defines bricolage as an "art of living" that reactivates technological memory and creative potential, enabling Africans to imagine relevant responses when

life itself becomes a daily challenge (Assogba, 1999). Before the escalation of extremism, local communities relied on smallholder agriculture and modest "small bricolage" practices such as informal trade and services to avoid destitution. Those with relatively greater resources herded cattle, goats, and sheep while migrating in search of pasture. Widespread insecurity forces farmers to abandon cultivation and compels nomads and pastoralists to settle in locations that often lack adequate grazing land, transforming flexible survival logic into blocked survival. Farming bans in frontline zones constitute a form of administrative violence that directly targets the core of peasant life because prohibiting access to land effectively prohibits access to livelihood. Authorities justify these bans by claiming that enemies hide in millet fields, framing them as security measures, yet their impact proves existential for farmers. Ela describes such conditions as moments when people must negotiate "living in death" because social structures eliminate both workspace and living space (Ela, 1980, 1990).

UNDP data reinforce this context by showing that recruitment into extremist groups in Sub-Saharan Africa is driven more by livelihood motives than by religious motives; poverty, unemployment, and economic uncertainty therefore play determinant roles in rendering extremism attractive and coercive (UNDP, 2023). This pattern aligns with the collapse of subsistence economies, soaring prices, and shrinking employment access due to curfews and market closures. Extremism operates as a force that deepens structural marginalization because it not only increases fatalities but also destroys the fundamental preconditions for the creative labor through which communities sustain themselves.

Table 1. Forms of Structural Suffering among Communities in Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon

Dimension of Suffering	Concrete Forms Experienced by Residents	Socio-Economic Impact
Limited Access to Food and Land	Bans on farming in frontline zones; shortened rainy seasons; forced cultivation of cash crops (cotton); restrictions on fishing in Lake Chad; restrictions on livestock routes	Decline in food production; scarcity of millet, meat, and fish; increasing food insecurity
Market and Trade Disruption	Bomb attacks at Mémé market; collapse of Banki, Amchidé, and Limani markets; decline in Mora market activity	Loss of informal livelihoods; forced migration to major cities; dependence on aid
Mobility Restrictions	Curfews; bans on night travel; closure of the Nigeria–Chad–Cameroon border	Decline in income for drivers, motorboys, and loading workers; rising transportation costs
Surge in Prices of Basic Necessities	Increase in egg prices (75→125 CFA); sugar (17,000→58,000 CFA); cooking oil (350→1,000 CFA); millet (150→350 CFA); crisis in *zouazoua* fuel supply	Declining purchasing power; subsistence economy transforms into a costly economy that penalizes the poor
Direct Violence and Trauma	Looting, murder, rape, kidnapping, arson	Psychological trauma; breakdown of social networks; permanent insecurity
Internal Displacement	Relocation of Mandara families; overcrowded housing; living in stadiums/schools; *réfugiés-nationaux*	Loss of housing; dependence on assistance; weakening of community cohesion
Stagnation of Economic Creativity (*Bricolage*)	Collapse of petty trade; bans on farming; forced settlement of herders without pasture	Economic survival reaches a dead end; decline in social innovation

Structural Marginalization	Weak state protection; economic predation; social exclusion	"Living in death" (*le cri de l'homme africain*); chronic poverty transforms into acute crisis

According to Bourdieu, stagnation emerges from the relationship between unequal social structures and a survival habitus continuously pressured by insecurity. Structures of inequality and institutional fragility shape survival dispositions that rely on informal strategies, small exchanges, and local social networks. When extremism narrows economic and social space, the productive habitus that normally sustains bricolage becomes paralyzed and gives way to a habitus of fear that prioritizes immediate safety. This transformation causes communities not only to lose income but also to lose the horizon of action that enables planning, small-scale investment, and social innovation, which have historically constituted the foundation of a "renaissance from below." Ela insists that Africa still retains the energy of social innovation; however, that energy requires minimal conditions of security and life certainty in order to flourish as a social renaissance (Ela, 1998). Religious extremism disrupts those minimal conditions through economic dislocation, layered impoverishment, internal displacement, and the collapse of spaces of solidarity, thereby transforming the "cry of the African" from a metaphor of structural suffering into an everyday social experience that closes opportunities for movement and creativity.

Religious Communities as Arenas of Resistance and Socio-Economic Renaissance

Local religious communities, particularly mosque congregational assemblies, possess practical capacity to reclaim the religious field from extremist domination and transform it into a space of resistance and socio-economic renaissance. The data support the working hypothesis that "assemblies of believers in zones attacked by terrorists can create hope," because mosque congregations constitute the institutions closest to the everyday lives of residents, interact most frequently with them, and mobilize collective action across families and villages with relative ease. These assemblies operate at levels that the state often cannot reach, especially in the porous and security-asymmetrical border areas of Cameroon–Nigeria–Chad, where formal control frequently lags behind the mobility of armed actors within ethnoculturally homogeneous settings. According to Bourdieu, the religious field does not function as a closed structure; it contains continuous competition to define orthodoxy and legitimate authority, so opportunities for contestation always remain available when community actors consolidate socially recognized symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1971). Mosques and networks of local ulama can therefore act as producers of counter-meanings that restore religion as an ethic of life rather than a license for violence.

Community renaissance begins with acknowledging the initial problem that generated the disorder of meaning, namely the instrumentalization of the Divine Word during the early phase of terrorist aggression. This study identifies four findings. First, many perpetrators of terror were recruited from Muslim communities. Second, coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims did not inherently generate hostility, and conflict emerged only when disputes over pastureland, territorial boundaries, and agricultural fields intensified. Third, terrorist movements do not equate to "Islamo-tribalism." Fourth, although poverty and suffering preceded some departures for "jihad," poverty alone does not sufficiently explain that decision. The research indicates that mass killings relate more closely to the *dissolution du religieux* and the manipulation of the Divine Word that construct symbolic foundations for violent practice (Cilliers, 2015). These findings position mosque assemblies as actors who are "called" to respond, because stigma, suspicion toward Muslims, daily anxiety, economic stagnation, and fragile social cohesion directly affect their own congregations. Social-religious responsibility emerges not because Islam constitutes an "absolute cause" of violence, but because violence is justified in the name of Islam and Muslim communities become its first victims.

Internal fractures within the religious landscape create openings for extremist infiltration. Islam in this region predominantly reflects Sufi traditions rooted in the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya orders, while

reformist currents such as Izala and influences associated with Wahhabi ideology also circulate. Certain revolutionary groups attempt to expand their influence, and some northern Nigerian contexts institutionalize particular versions of Islam within state structures (Kobo, 2021; Mustapha & Bunza, 2014). This complexity rapidly redefines the boundaries of the religious field and enables small groups to establish new institutions and mosques, conduct indoctrination, and produce competing "words" that easily shift into intergroup hostility. Bourdieu characterizes such dynamics as typical of a religious field linked to symbolic manipulation when new actors seek to monopolize interpretive authority (Bourdieu, 1977). Radicalization often begins as criticism of "official Islam," which radicals portray as corrupt and overly aligned with the state, and then quickly evolves into a violent project determined to confront "all who do not think like us." This situation underscores the need for community strategies that move beyond moral condemnation and undertake systematic reconstruction of symbolic authority.

First, responses must operate within the ideological realm, because religion functions as a language that shapes knowledge, communication, and agreements about the meaning of the social world. Religion serves as a symbolic medium capable of building consensus around the "meaning of signs" and integrating collective representations. Mosque assemblies possess instruments to enter an "open war" against extremist *nécridéologie* through textual de-occultation, clarification of verses, and faith education oriented toward human salvation on earth, especially for uprooted and wounded persons. Normative formulations can guide community preaching, for example the concise affirmation that faith calls human beings to "discover the intolerable suffering of life" and to reject mystifying ideologies and fear. This statement situates religion within an ethical mandate that rejects violence and restores victims' dignity, while closing symbolic pathways of recruitment legitimation. This work restores religion's symbolic power as the capacity to shape ways of seeing and believing, because symbolic power can "make one see and make one believe," and thereby transform action in the world (Bourdieu, 1977). Concrete mechanisms include establishing Qur'anic and theological schools to train educators and exegetes capable of countering fundamentalist infiltration (Thurston, 2012); strengthening interactive *wazou* forums held under trees to discuss threats facing residents; delivering five-minute sermons by imams after each obligatory prayer (Kemboly, 2021; Shittu & Yakub, 2024); and integrating themes of violence, poverty, and vulnerability into Friday sermons and the two major Eid sermons (Thesnaar, 2024). These measures target the foundation of habitus, because youth habitus forms through repetition of messages, authoritative figures, and communal routines.

Second, responses must foster transversal peace as a prerequisite for socio-economic renaissance. Religion and politics interact as intersecting domains, since religious institutions often perform functions of conserving or organizing social order at the local level (Bourdieu, 1971). In regions lacking a single hierarchical structure such as a global caliphate, mosque assemblies operate under the influence of Sufi leaders, local religious figures, and traditional authorities who shape social behavior. Mosque assemblies move beyond "consolatory prayer" and engage in concrete social decisions alongside local political authorities regarding purposeless violence and economic destitution. Ela's research emphasizes that individuals struggle to make decisions when fear dominates collective consciousness; therefore, community work must restore security as a condition for bricolage and economic activity (Ela, 1980). This study identifies measures that directly target restoration of social security: coordinated condemnation of *mauvaise foi* and religious teaching free from fetishism; formulation of collective action orientations that unite residents in projects of liberating people from fear; and internal community cooperation as the basis for "peace of heart," which restores residents' courage to return to fields, markets, and trade (Bava, El Asri, & Hamdaoui, 2021). The concept of "transversal peace" aligns with a holistic African political horizon that defines peace not merely as the absence of war but as a social condition that enables communal life to resume (Mbembe, 2000). Mosque assemblies thus function as social infrastructures linking residents, local authorities, and community-based security mechanisms.

Third, responses must shape assemblies that are both protective and entrepreneurial, because restoring social cohesion requires economic mechanisms that deter recruitment temptations and stabilize everyday life. For example, certain Kanuri communities practice interest-free trading capital support by providing "seed capital" to family members and organizing weekly "prayer contributions"

to prevent business collapse (Saunders, 2019). Communities position this scheme as a grassroots survival strategy that strengthens social bonds and reduces radicalization opportunities by stabilizing the community economy and tightening interresident relationships. Zakat functions as a redistribution instrument that dignitaries can direct toward "the crying human being" as a starting point for recovery, while avoiding long-term dependency. Additional income sources may emerge from controlled commodification of community resources, such as commercializing sheep skins from religious celebrations—traditionally donated to mosques—then processing them artisanally into wallets, shoes, or belts for sale. The trade in "sacred objects" around Monday Market in Maiduguri and the entrance of the Grand Mosque of Ndjamena—books, prayer beads, veils, dates, and exegetical literature—can provide employment and disseminate the "right Word" when properly managed (Alao, 2022; Zenn, 2025). Mosque communities can facilitate production and importation, strengthen small business governance, and open secure economic pathways for youth so that they do not gravitate toward violent networks.

The proposed protective community model also incorporates social reintegration and collective vigilance. Research indicates that some suicide attacks involved internal complicity by "sons of the village," which requires communities to remain vigilant when residents go to fields and markets. Border porosity and asymmetrical warfare limit the effectiveness of military action alone; mosque assemblies, which often enjoy broader local representation, can collaborate with community vigilance committees and security forces to reduce the operational space of terrorist networks. This direction resonates with policy literature that situates extremism prevention within community-based and early warning mechanisms. Juma and Sabala emphasize lessons from Boko Haram and al-Shabaab that demand local actor involvement to contain extremist spread and strengthen sustainable exit pathways (Juma & Sabala, 2024). Sambaiga highlights the importance of innovative early warning mechanisms to prevent extremist violence, particularly when the state faces reach limitations (Sambaiga, 2022). UNDP recommendations underscore the need for community-based rehabilitation and reintegration, as well as investment in basic services and quality livelihoods to prevent voluntary recruitment (UNDP, 2023). This study enriches those recommendations with context-specific micro-instruments: exegetical education, disciplined daily preaching, interest-free capital schemes, targeted zakat distribution, and facilitation of local trade anchored in the moral authority of the mosque.

Table 2. Mosque Community Responses to Extremism and Socio-Economic Crisis

Response Domain	Concrete Mechanisms	Implementing Actors	Strategic Objectives
Ideological (Reconstruction of Symbolic Authority)	Textual de-occultation; clarification of verses; contextual faith education; Qur'anic and theological schools; *wazou* forums; brief post-prayer sermons; thematic sermons on violence and poverty	Imams, local ulama, religious educators, congregational assemblies	Reclaim the religious field from extremist manipulation; restore religion's symbolic power; shape moderate habitus among youth
Transversal Peace (Reconstruction of Social Security)	Coordination with local authorities; collective condemnation of *mauvaise foi*; action orientation toward liberation from fear; community cooperation; collaboration with community vigilance committees	Mosque assemblies, Sufi leaders, traditional leaders, local officials	Restore collective security; strengthen social cohesion; reopen economic and social activity
Protective–Entrepreneurial	Interest-free business capital; weekly prayer contributions;	Mosque congregants,	Deter extremist recruitment; stabilize

Economy (Socio-Economic Renaissance)	targeted zakat; commercialization of community products (sheep skins, religious literature, artifacts); small business facilitation	families, local artisans, mosque administrators	daily life; strengthen solidarity and community economic resilience

The entire sequence of actions demonstrates a repositioning in the distribution of symbolic capital and a reorientation of collective habitus. Extremism establishes authority through violence and monopolizes interpretation, whereas mosque communities construct alternative symbolic capital through moral legitimacy, social proximity, and the capacity to organize solidarity. This alternative symbolic capital operates when congregations produce meanings that gain broader social acceptance, align more closely with the ethics of coexistence, and provide practical responses to livelihood crises. Collective habitus shifts when the repetition of peaceful messages, mutual assistance practices, access to small-scale capital, and restored social security once again become routine. The religious field thus transforms from a space of divisive struggles over meaning into a space of transformation that restores the capacity for action. The mosque functions not as a passive normative symbol but as a social institution capable of integrating ideological struggle, transversal peacebuilding, and bottom-up economic reconstruction as prerequisites for socio-economic renaissance.

4. Discussion

This study produces three principal findings. First, religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa operates as symbolic domination within the religious field: extremist actors seize symbolic capital by monopolizing interpretation, producing rigid classifications of "true believer–infidel–hypocrite," and enforcing obedience through the sacralization of violence. Second, this symbolic domination attaches itself to an older structural crisis—the "cry of the African"—because violence and security policies such as curfews, market and border closures, and agricultural restrictions freeze subsistence economies, sever solidarities, and paralyze bricolage as a creative survival capacity. Third, the religious field does not remain static; mosque congregational assemblies possess the potential to become arenas of resistance and socio-economic renaissance through ideological contestation over interpretation, the production of transversal peace, and community-based mechanisms of protection and economic recovery (Hexham, 2002; UNDP, 2023).

Within Bourdieu's framework, extremism gains effectiveness when objective structures—poverty, social exclusion, and fragile social contracts—create spaces of vulnerability that render promises of "moral order" and "salvation" credible. Extremist groups conduct symbolic investments: they transform religious interpretation into symbolic capital, lock the boundaries of orthodoxy, and implant new dispositions within collective habitus through repeated discourse, fear, and the ritualization of violence. The relationship between unequal social structures and mental structures shaped through habitus explains why the same religious message can generate different actions; in communities that have lost a sense of security, interpretations offering identity certainty and strict obedience often appear more "reasonable" than interpretations demanding patience and gradual work. Symbolic domination then moves from language to the body: actors present violence as "worship," so social discipline no longer requires formal institutions; it operates through fear, stigma, and control of social space. This process explains why extremist violence does not remain a mere security incident but becomes a mechanism of social reproduction that damages families, local authorities, and everyday work networks (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

This study engages three dominant strands of previous research. First, security and counterterrorism literature primarily frames extremism as a threat to state and regional stability, emphasizing escalation of attacks, security policies, regional cooperation, and preventive tools such as early warning systems (Dowd, 2016; Haruna, 2022; O. Ismail, 2013; Mshelia, 2024; Sambaiga, 2022). While this study acknowledges the scale of the threat, it adds that the central problem also involves

"symbolic governance": violence persists because extremist actors prevail in struggles over interpretive legitimacy and regulate public morality through rigid social classifications. Second, ideological-theological approaches emphasize doctrinal transformation, transnational puritanism, and the production of extremist discourse through communication and media (Chiluwa et al., 2020; Hassan, 2022; Hexham, 2002; Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022). These studies demonstrate that ideology becomes effective when it attaches to material conditions and functions as symbolic capital convertible into social control. Third, socio-structural and political-economic approaches interpret extremism as a product of inequality, poverty, and governance failure, aligning with African liberation theology's reflection that situates religion within landscapes of structural suffering (Ela, 1980, 1994, 1998). This study follows the third trajectory but expands it by adding a dimension that remains insufficiently articulated: the capacity of local religious communities as agents of reconstruction, analyzed through mechanisms of field contestation and symbolic capital repositioning. The originality of this study lies in integrating African liberation theology (suffering–social innovation) with Bourdieu's theory of practice (field–habitus–symbolic capital) to explain religion as both an arena of conflict and a source of reconstruction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Ela, 1998).

One may read this study across three analytical domains. Historically, extremism appears as a new layer of violence superimposed upon a long history of rural vulnerability and state penetration that has not always been protective; it accelerates the "banality of crisis," pushing societies from chronic poverty into recurring emergencies while eroding the social creativity required for a "renaissance from below" (Ela, 1990, 1994). Socially, extremism restructures daily life: markets disappear, transport networks collapse, prices surge, internal displacement rises, and trust networks weaken due to stigma and suspicion; consequently, bricolage as survival grounded in social relations shifts into blocked survival. At this point, findings concerning market closures, agricultural bans, mobility restrictions, and livelihood collapse demonstrate that violence does not merely kill; it also erases the social prerequisites for work and collective organization (Assogba, 1999; Ela, 1980). Ideologically, extremism reveals how religion as language and symbolic medium can operate in two directions: when extremist actors dominate it, religion becomes an instrument of domination and *nécridéologie*; when communities reclaim it, religion can function as a medium of logical and social integration that restores horizons of meaning, rejects *takfir*, and reorganizes perceptual schemes so that violence loses legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1977; Marshall-Fratani & Péclard, 2002).

This study highlights the paradox of religion under conditions of conflict as a reflection of its functions and dysfunctions. The function of the religious field appears in its capacity to provide a shared language, moral authority, and collective rhythm that communities can employ to organize social protection, restore security, and reactivate economic cooperation, as previous studies have shown in relation to faith-based welfare provision and community service in contexts of limited or uneven state support (Jawad, 2009; Owens & Smith, 2005; Sakai, 2012; Vala, Huang, & Sun, 2015). Dysfunction emerges when the religious field undergoes a "dissolution" of its boundaries so that interpretation becomes a commodity of power; internal competition, indoctrination, and the delegitimization of local Islam create openings for extremist actors to convert symbols into violence and transform piety into a license for punishment (De Genova, 2023; Fredriksen & Bandama, 2025; German, 2022). Another dysfunction arises when state responses rely excessively on security approaches; costly and minimally effective operations, combined with rights violations, can strengthen extremist narratives and expand recruitment bases, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence at the community level (Ottuh & Erhabor, 2022; UNDP, 2023). In Bourdieu's terms, this dysfunction reflects a failure in the healthy distribution of symbolic capital: when interpretive authority falls into the hands of actors who convert symbols into fear-based control, collective habitus shifts away from work and solidarity toward obedience and defensive postures.

Addressing these dysfunctions requires more than "security operations"; it demands reconstruction of the field through symbolic and community-based economic policies. First, policymakers must treat the strengthening of moderate interpretive capacity and local religious literacy as preventive infrastructure through exegesis education, text clarification forums, and disciplined

micro-level preaching that deprives *takfir* logic of its symbolic market. Second, mosque assemblies should serve as nodes of transversal peace through concrete social decisions—mediation mechanisms, community ethical codes, and coordination with local authorities—to restore security and enable residents to reopen markets, move freely, and return to work. Third, communities must institutionalize community-based economic recovery as a counter-recruitment strategy: strengthening productive and targeted zakat, providing interest-free micro-capital schemes, supporting microenterprises around religious spaces, and establishing reintegration pathways for affected residents so that extremism loses its appeal as a "livelihood." Fourth, states and development partners should shift from reactive responses toward preventive investment in basic services, decent employment, and community-based rehabilitation, because economic deprivation and social wounds constitute primary entry points for the reproduction of extremism (Juma & Sabala, 2024; Sambaiga, 2022). All these action plans follow the same logic: reduce the space for extremist symbolic domination, strengthen socially legitimate counter-symbolic capital, and redirect collective habitus toward solidarity, work, and bricolage as the foundation of socio-economic renaissance.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be understood merely as theological deviation or a security threat; rather, it constitutes a practice of symbolic domination operating within a social arena long marked by structural suffering. The central lesson is that violence in the name of religion becomes effective when it succeeds in seizing symbolic capital within the religious field, monopolizing interpretation, and shaping collective habitus through exclusive moral classifications. In contexts of poverty, social exclusion, and crises of state legitimacy, such symbolic domination deepens socio-economic stagnation, paralyzes survival creativity (*bricolage*), and transforms the "cry of the African" into an everyday social experience. Yet the findings also underscore another dimension of this dynamic: the religious field does not remain static. It remains open to contestation. Mosque congregational assemblies and local religious communities possess tangible capacity to reclaim symbolic authority, rearticulate religion as solidarity and social protection, and foster community-based socio-economic renaissance. Religion thus appears as an ambivalent arena—it can function as an instrument for reproducing violence or as a source of social reconstruction—depending on the distribution of symbolic capital and the positions of actors within the field.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in its conceptual integration of African liberation theology and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. The research not only enriches socio-structural interpretations of extremism through the analytical lenses of field, habitus, and symbolic capital, but also advances a new perspective on local religious communities as agents of social transformation. By combining analysis of structural suffering (Ela) and symbolic domination (Bourdieu), this study proposes an alternative conceptual framework for understanding religion as both a terrain of conflict and a source of socio-economic renaissance. This contribution expands a discourse long dominated by security and ideological-theological approaches by centering symbolic dynamics and community agency in the analysis.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. First, the research relies on document-based and conceptual analysis and therefore does not incorporate quantitative data or longitudinal field surveys capable of empirically measuring the long-term effectiveness of religious community interventions. Second, its geographical focus on specific Sub-Saharan contexts limits the generalizability of findings to other African settings with different social and political configurations. Third, the study emphasizes symbolic and community dimensions; it does not examine in depth the internal dynamics of states, global economic forces, or transnational actors. Future research may develop this study through mixed-method approaches, expand the geographical scope, and empirically test protective and participatory religious community models in preventing extremist recruitment and restoring local economies. Such further inquiry would deepen and operationalize understanding of the relationship among religion,

symbolic power, and social reconstruction in Africa, both in public policy contexts and in community practice.

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