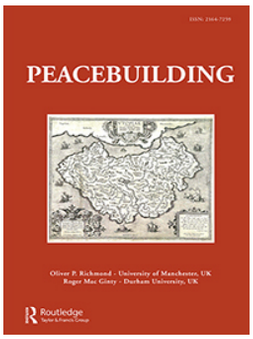

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Sulhu as local peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

Local peacebuilding surfaced to contest the fundamental premise of the liberal peace paradigm, specifically its hierarchical top-down approach and inadequacy in guaranteeing sustainable peace. However, scholarly works have yet to adequately address the question of who, what, and where 'the local' is in local peacebuilding. Drawing on interviews, this study explores *Sulhu*, a religious norm of mediation and reconciliation rooted in the socio-cultural precepts of Northern Nigeria, to advance the concept of local peacebuilding. In doing so, it examines *Sulhu* as local peace deployed in the community reintegration of former terrorists in Nigeria. *Sulhu* broadens theoretical discussions around the 'ontological' imprecision in the local peacebuilding discourse by advancing that 'the local' in local peacebuilding be understood as contextual beliefs, norms, and practices. This study advances the field of peacebuilding research by answering the question of 'what is the local' in local peacebuilding. The article concludes that drawing from cultural precepts such as *Sulhu* can aid communal rehabilitation and reconciliation in contexts affected by terrorism, conflict, and violence more broadly.

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Local peacebuilding; deradicalisation; community reintegration; Sulhu; Borno Model; Nigeria

Introduction

Within the field of peacebuilding, critical peace scholars have argued for a more empirically grounded analysis of 'the local' in broadening our understanding of local peacebuilding beyond conceptual straitjackets while also allowing for flexible interpretations of 'who, what, and where' is the local in local peacebuilding.[1] Precisely, Mac Ginty contends that centralising 'the local' as locally grounded beliefs, precepts, norms, and cultural sensitivities that underpin peacebuilding activities also enhances the possibility of widening 'the local' and liberating it from the conceptual straitjackets that it currently encounters.[2] This article is an attempt at theoretically elucidating 'what is the local' in local peacebuilding. In doing so, it presents *Sulhu* –a religious conflict mediation approach – as local

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[1]Kristin Ljungkvist and Anna Jarstad, 'Revisiting the Local Turn in Peacebuilding – Through the Emerging Urban Approach', *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2209–26; and Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace', *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763–83.

[2]Roger Mac Ginty, 'Where is the Local? Critical Localism and Peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly*, 36, no 5 (2015): 840–56.

peacebuilding.[3] It draws from ethnographic accounts of the Nigeria's use of *Sulhu* as a social reconciliation and communal healing community reintegration effort for terrorists in the country. Therefore, it not only answers LjunGkvist and Jarstard's question of 'what is the local'[4] in local peacebuilding but sets new direction in the field of peacebuilding or conflict-resolution mechanism in international security broadly by drawing from ethnographic accounts in North-eastern Nigeria.

Major assumptions of the liberal peacebuilding and its top-down approaches prioritises and attaches the attainment of long-lasting peace in conflict-affected societies to the implementation of state-building processes and its democratic norms by external actors.[5] These ideals include principles of rule of law, free market economy, and security sector reform have been brandished as core pillars of attaining peace.[6] Further reiterating the political and economic principles underpinning peacebuilding, scholars highlight the inseparability of development and security nexus as vital components of ensuring peace in conflict contexts.[7] As a result, peace approaches and interventions by various state and non-state actors has largely epitomised the liberal peacebuilding model, its expectation of security-development nexus, and liberal governance as precursors to long-lasting peace.[8] However, an increased criticism regarding the liberal peace model arose concerning its inability to ensure sustainable peace, forestall reoccurrence of conflict, establish structural stability, and prevent against exclusionary tendencies.[9]

Thus, the 'local turn' to peacebuilding emerged as one of the dominant frameworks that not only seeks to challenge and advance the current liberal understanding of peace,[10] but also to give primacy to dynamics of bottom-up approaches to peace. A local turn in peacebuilding, critical scholars argue, remedies these above strictures and the oversimplifications inherent in liberal peacebuilding approaches while also enabling the practice of sustainable peace.[11] The local turn to peacebuilding emerged as a response to the liberal peacebuilding approach, based on the assumption that sustainable peacebuilding relies on applying bottom-up approaches and promoting local participation, ownership, and governance in understanding and ensuring positive peace.[12] Hence, there

[3]The notion of Sulhu discussed in this article is different from the covert program operated by the Nigerian State Security Service to disarm senior jihadists commanders. (See: Anyadike, O. 'EXCLUSIVE: Nigeria's secret programme to lure top Boko Haram defectors', 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/8/19/nigerias-secret-programme-to-lure-top-boko-haram-defectors).

[4]Ljungkvist and Jarstad, 'Revisiting the Local Turn in Peacebuilding'.

[5]Roland Paris, 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 36 (2012): 337–65.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Rethinking Weberian Approaches to State Building 1', in *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding,* ed. David Chandler and Timothy D. Sisk (London: Routledge, 2013), 3–14.

[8]Mark Duffield, 'Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid', *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 308–20.

[9]Thania Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment Towards an Agenda for Future Research', in *The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding,* ed. Joakim Öjendal, LIsabell Schierenbeck and Caroline Hughes, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 41–58; and Thania Paffenholz, ed., *Civil Society & Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010).

[10]Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Bullding'.

[11]Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, 'The "Local Turn" in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–39; and Louise Olsson and Anna K. Jarstad, 'Local Ownership of Peace', *Building Peace, Creating Conflict* (2011): 89–104.

[12]Antonia Does, 'Inclusivity and Local Perspectives in Peacebuilding: Issues, Lessons, Challenges', (2013); Oliver P. Richmond, 'Beyond Local Ownership in the Architecture of International Peacebuilding', *Ethnopolitics* 11, no. 4 (2012): 354–75; Timothy Donais, 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post- Conflict Peacebuilding Processes', *Peace & Change* 34, no. 1 (2009): 3–26; and Timothy Donais, ed., *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-Conflict Consensus-Building* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

are varying perspectives that underpin how we can understand local approaches to peacebuilding. The bulk of research on local peacebuilding points to territorialised, relational, and actor-based power relations as underpinning/shaping the various interpretations of local peacebuilding approaches.[15] A central theme in the discourse emphasises the importance of the agency of individuals enduring conflict, emphasising the importance of approaching peacebuilding as a bottom-up process.

However, despite the growing advancements in the literature on the local peacebuilding approach, scholars emphasise the ambiguity underpinning 'the local' in local peacebuilding.[13] This may partly be a symptom of the normative binaries that shapes and underpins meanings of 'the local' in the local peacebuilding agenda.[14] Specifically, it has been argued that these binaries, as well as the 'inherently relational' dimension underlying local,[15] influence the ways in which we make sense of, 'who, what, and where' of the local in local peacebuilding and thus render it ambiguous.

Thus, drawing from ethnographic interviews with religious cleric, security agents, community members and NGOs workers in Northern Nigeria, this article presents *Sulhu* as an example of local peacebuilding. In particular, it contends that *Sulhu's* expression and pragmatism as a local peace approach to DDR efforts are characterised by and reflective of the syncretism of traditional and religious norms that shape everyday life in Nigeria. Despite not being a new issue in Nigeria, this syncretism serves as a hallmark of conflict dynamics and shapes local peacebuilding approaches with unique peculiarities. Thus, as a local approach to DDR, *Sulhu* embodies reconciliation, forgiveness, and justice – tenets rooted in culture and religion – all of which facilitate communal healing and overcome feelings of fear and social dislocations that arise from terrorist reintegration into communities. The article further argues that, although *Sulhu* prioritises community agency in DDR peacebuilding efforts, uncritically fetishising it as a silver bullet could potentially foster power contestations and inequalities that ultimately undermine peace processes.

The article makes several contributions. Conceptually, the article deepens scholarly understanding of what local peace is – or, rather, what local peace looks like beyond abstract understandings. Put differently, it provides conceptual clarity to the 'ontological' imprecision of 'the local',[16] which constitutes one limitation to continued theorisations of local turn to peacebuilding. Through an empirical analysis of 'the local' as religious norms rooted in sociocultural precepts, the article answers the 'what is the local' component of the 'ontological' question. Thus, contributing to the formation of an important framework that elucidates local peacebuilding processes in terrorism-affected and DDR contexts. Empirically, the article presents rich primary data, deepening the ongoing scholarly effort that recognises the importance of giving priority to alternative approaches to peacebuilding in the global south.[17] Furthermore, the article is interdisciplinary as it draws on the DDR literature to elucidate the dynamics of local peacebuilding mechanisms in community reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction. Recognising these helps explain the gap that exists on the

[13]See note 4 above.
[14]Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding'; Mac Ginty, 'Where is the Local?'; and Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Bullding'.
[15]Caroline Hughes, Joakim Öjendal, and Isabell Schierenbeck, 'The Struggle Versus the Song – The Local Turn in Peacebuilding: An Introduction', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 817–24.
[16]See note 4 above.
[17]Reina C. Neufeldt, Mary Lou Klassen, John Danboyi, Jessica Dyck, and Mugu Zakka Bako, 'Gaps in Knowledge About Local Peacebuilding: A Study in Deficiency from Jos, Nigeria', *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 7 (2020): 1103–21.

nuanced nature of locally tailored approaches in DDR responses. Beyond academia, these insights on Sulhu as a local peace in the DDR process will deepen practitioners' and policymakers' understanding of what constitutes sustainable peace in the complex context of terrorist community reintegration, and how to achieve it in the broader context of post-conflict reconstruction. More specifically, it offers distinct alternatives to comprehending the locally accepted methods for conceptualising peace in the context of reintegrating terrorists into communities. Policymakers and practitioners can then use this knowledge to develop practical strategies for managing recidivism, reintegration, its associated risks of stigma, and transitional justice issues. The following section examines scholarly debates on liberal and local peacebuilding.

Liberal and local peacebuilding debate

The central thesis of liberal peacebuilding highlights the importance of incorporating democratic principles into political norms and institutions in conflict societies. Thus, achieving long-term peace and development in these societies requires the incorporation of principles such as multi-party democracy, free and fair elections, the rule of law, individual freedom, and a free-market economy.[18] The foundations of liberal peacebuilding deeply ingrain security and development. Referred to as the 'security-development nexus', this concept brings together two previously separate policy areas and involves distinct groups of individuals and organisations.[19] Liberal peace, according to some scholars, aims to create lasting peace by ending both overt and structural violence and aligning social, economic, and political systems with a mix of liberal and neoliberal international standards in a world that is interconnected.[20] As a result, political and economic liberalism emerged as the solution to conflict, hence prompting a shift in philosophy and approaches within international organisations and development agencies. Therefore, the models and strategies of liberal peacebuilding have greatly influenced peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions in fragile and conflict-affected states like Afghanistan, Iraq, Cambodia, and various regions in Africa.[21]

Burdened by the unsatisfactory outcomes of liberal peacebuilding strategies to providing sustainable peace in Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the notion of local peace emerged to address the inadequacies of liberal peace, specifically its failure at ensuring long-term peace. At the origin of the conception of local turn to peacebuilding lies explicit or implicit assumptions that the key to sustainable and long-term peace entails a strong focus on bottom-up approaches, which places a premium on the inclusion of the local context, local communities, local involvement, and ownership, in order to better understand and address the issues related to violent conflicts.[22] The local turn guarantees the incorporation of peacebuilding into the cultural sensibility and norms, as well as capturing the lived experiences of people directly affected by conflicts.

[18]Cedric De Coning, 'Adaptive Peacebuilding', *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 301–17.
[19]Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Critical Debates on Liberal Peacebuilding' (2013): 242–52.
[20]Jason Franks, and Oliver P. Richmond, 'Coopting liberal peace-building: Untying the Gordian knot in Kosovo', *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 1 (2008): 81–103.
[21]Roland Paris, 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 337–65.
[22]Ibid; Leonardsson and Rudd, 'The "Local Turn"'; Oliver P. Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Where Now for the Critique of the Liberal Peace?', *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 2 (2015): 171–89.

Although it is widely agreed upon that the local approach is crucial for achieving lasting peace, there are debates on the 'local turns' encapsulated in local peacebuilding. Thania Paffenholz identifies and categorises three local turns to peacebuilding.[23] These are the first, second, and third local turn towards peacebuilding. The first local turn inspired by the works of John Lederach,[24] emphasised the agency of local (i.e. non-elite, national) actors and their key role in achieving lasting peace, emphasising the need to empower local people as the primary authors of peacebuilding instead of externally designed and driven peace interventions. This change was based on the idea that only local actors from conflict contexts could establish durable peace in their nations.[25] The second local shift criticised and resisted the international liberal peacebuilding project's failure. Scholars criticised the liberal peacebuilding endeavour as externally controlled and missing contextual understanding, insights, and local actors' interests, and thus argued for the inclusion of local actors.[26] A third local turn has recently evolved, drawing on the previous two and arguing for peacebuilders to pragmatically discuss how to transfer authority, agency, and finances from international to local players. In this third turn, scholars argue that decolonising peacebuilding knowledge, supporting direct, flexible, and risk-positive funding, replacing technocratic programming and monitoring with creative and participatory approaches, and creating an environment conducive to local peacebuilders' work are necessary to achieve this.[27]

Notwithstanding the emergence of the local turn to peacebuilding framework and its overarching goal of achieving sustainable peace, the very notion of 'local' itself remains enmeshed in ambiguity and varying interpretations. As such, critical peacebuilding scholars posits that there is a loose comprehension of the term 'local', and an absence of a fine-grained and specific understanding of what it constitutes.[28] Encapsulating this ambiguity more coherently, LjunGkvist and Jarstard, aptly inquire, 'who, what, and where is the local?[29] Critical peace approaches have proposed several interpretations of 'the local'. One of the key propositions interprets 'the local' as a binary juxtaposition to the international. This interpretation of 'the local' is used to contrast the nature of peace interventions administered in conflicts contexts.[30] In this regard, 'the local' indicates peace interventions and measures internal to the conflict contexts, while non-local or international interventions are external models of peace brought to the conflict contexts.[31] Other interpretations tend to more specifically link 'the local' to the type of actors that perform peacebuilding activities, thus suggesting an actor-based and social-position interpretation of 'the local'. In this regard, 'the local' pertains to non-elite and non-state actors such as NGOs, civil society, diasporas, local communities, or citizens. Furthermore, it is used to capture community-level actors, nation-state-level actors, and sometimes meso-level actors that occupy largely obscure spaces.

[23]Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding'; Thania Paffenholz, Philip Poppelreuter, and Nicholas Ross, 'Toward a Third Local Turn: Identifying and Addressing Obstacles to Localization in Peacebuilding', *Negotiation Journal* 39, no. 4 (2023): 349–75.
[24]John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
[25]Ibid.
[26]Paris, 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding'; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Bullding'; and Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding'.
[27]Paffenholz, Poppelreuter, and Ross, 'Toward a Third Local Turn'.
[28]Leonardsson and Rudd, 'The 'Local Turn'.
[29]See note 4 above.
[30]Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding'.
[31]Ibid.

The critical scholarship on peacebuilding is sceptical of these diverse interpretations, and critique them on many guises. First, they argue that these interpretations largely reproduce the power dynamics inherent in liberal peace theory. This results in the imbrication with liberal peace theory and the creation of artificial divisions that forecloses a critical analysis of the effectiveness of local approaches to peacebuilding. On the one hand, they argue that using the term 'locals' to describe areas, individuals, and activities suggests a sense of separation and subservience to the 'international space'. On the other hand, they contend that many interpretations of the local utilises a binary lens which renders it essentialist and hides the inherent intricacies in the local. They also contend that 'the local' becomes considerably more complex, especially when examined on a global scale, such as in the context of diaspora groups and other affiliated international organisations. This blurs the boundaries between 'the local' and 'the global'.[32] In this context, the argument posits that a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual imprecision and vagueness of 'the local' necessitates breaking it down into three distinct lines of inquiry or categories. The first line of inquiry is 'ontological', which asks who, what, and where the local is in peacebuilding. The second line of inquiry pertains to the 'epistemological aspects', which asks how we know the local and its relationship to peacebuilding. The third line of inquiry on the other hand focuses on the 'methodological' aspect which asks how we go about studying the practices, effectiveness, and outcomes of local peacebuilding initiatives.[33]

Attempts to address these questions and comprehend more empirically the dynamics of local peacebuilding remain few and far between and have not brought much clarity to the conceptual challenge, specifically the 'ontological' indeterminacy of 'the local'. While critical peacebuilding scholarship has provided significant critiques that highlight the conceptual imprecision of 'the local' in various accounts, this article suggests that these critical analyses miss an important opportunity to clarify the 'ontological' indeterminacy. Specifically, this article argues that the current state of critical peacebuilding scholarship, which ends conversations about local peacebuilding at the point of questioning without providing answers, contradicts the field's emancipatory and transformative agenda. Thus, this article can be read as a critique of the critiques of local peacebuilding. It does not seek to erase the gains of scholars whose scholarly focus foregrounds the 'ontological questions' but rather attempts to answer these questions. It suggests that debates on local peacebuilding should go beyond simply identifying the questions surrounding conceptual strictures. Instead, they should provide empirically grounded responses that contribute to the theorisation of the local turn in peacebuilding.

The study acknowledges and does not take for granted the important contribution of MacGinty's argument, which calls for a de-territorialised perspective of 'the local' and its understanding as systems of beliefs, precepts, and norms that underpin peacebuilding activities.[34] In fact, this article aligns with this perspective of 'the local' and its attempts at resolving one of the components of the 'ontological enquiry', that is, where is the local in local peacebuilding. Despite these insights, this article argues that we are yet to fully theorise the 'ontological' question of 'what is the local', particularly when considering the

[32]See note 4 above.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Mac Ginty, 'Where is the Local?'.

global south. Addressing this gap, this article proposes that *Sulhu*, a religious conflict mediation approach, should be seen as 'the local' in contexts affected terrorism and conflict and violence more broadly. The article argues that in many conflict and peacebuilding contexts, including north-eastern Nigeria, religious, traditional, and cultural norms shape the everyday, including conflict resolution dynamics, and, as such, constitute 'the local'. This expands upon the notion that 'the local' in local peacebuilding signifies contextual cultural sensitivities, norms, and practices that are locally rooted. Therefore, this article suggests that we should continue to address 'the local' as locally grounded norms, cultural sensitivities, and precepts in relation to other theoretical questions in local peacebuilding. The next section examines the debates on post-conflict reintegration and local peacebuilding mechanisms processes.

Post-conflict reintegration and local peacebuilding mechanisms

To adequately illustrate this article's argument, it is expedient to bring the above discussion on peacebuilding at close par to DDR measures; specifically, this involves demonstrating how scholarly criticisms of local peacebuilding is more reflected in DDR programmes. In order to do this, it is crucial to situate the argument within two key theoretical debates. On the one hand, the article considers the literature that focuses on post-conflict reintegration and DDR as components of peacebuilding. On the other hand, it explores the existing debates on the use of traditional mechanisms of transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction in Africa. One of the central arguments in the literature on post-conflict reintegration relevant to this article revolves around the proposition that there is a close relationship between DDR and the sustainability of peacebuilding processes.[35] Özerdem argues that DDR is a multifaceted process encompassing political, socio-economic, humanitarian, and military dimensions. Consequently, every element of DDR, ranging from disarming to reintegration, encompasses actions that are highly likely to have significant ramifications for the process of peacebuilding.[36] Although scholars also highlight the exclusionary nature of DDR programmes, noting that despite being promoted as community-focused, the programmes are not grounded in the realities of those directly impacted by conflict, thus influencing its sustainable peacebuilding objectives. [37]

The core pillars of the DDR processes, such as weapons management and social or economic reintegration of ex-combatants, are essential for ensuring peace and its sustainability in societies emerging from conflict.[38] Some studies argue that implementing DDR measures in isolation from broader peace practices is impossible due to their vital

[35]Alpaslan Özerdem, 'Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration', in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* ed. Roger Mac Ginty, 1st ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 225–36; Alpaslan Özerdem, 'Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned from a Cross-Cultural Perspective', *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (2002): 961–75; Alpaslan Özerdem, "A Re-Conceptualisation of Ex-Combatant Reintegration: 'Social Reintegration' Approach", *Conflict, Security & Development* 12, no. 1 (2012): 51–73; and W. Andy Knight, 'Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Africa: An Overview', *African security* 1, no. 1 (2008): 24–52.

[36]Özerdem, 'Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration'.

[37]Sally Sharif, 'A Critical Review of Evidence from Ex-combatant Re-Integration Programs' (2018).

[38]Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa, 'Postconflict Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Southern Africa', *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (2007): 73–89.

role in shaping peacebuilding processes.[39] Post-conflict social reintegration components of DDR include community-level programmes aimed at reintegrating ex-combatants into society, which promote reconciliation and minimise recidivism.[40]

However, there are contestations on the usability of standardised peacebuilding approaches within DDR programmes, particularly for addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by people negotiating conflict in their everyday lives. Thus, local traditional and religious forms of transitional justice and peacebuilding are emphasised.[41] For instance, the gacaca courts, a community-level socio-legal practice, have been highlighted as an important tool for aiding reconciliation and transitional justice in post-genocide Rwanda.[42] This system allows the participation and ownership of victims and perpetrators in the arbitration of issues directly impacting them, as well as the nuanced administration of social justice and reconciliation vis-à-vis contextual lived experiences and realities of Rwandans.[43]

Furthermore, the Acholi justice system and the reconciliation ritual of Mato Oput in Uganda have also been discussed as localised justice mechanisms.[44] The ICC's role in Uganda has been criticised for imposing a partial and compromised Western form of justice, which ignores local mechanisms for conflict resolution, social reconciliation, and accountability allocation. In response, the Acholi people of Northern Uganda embrace this form of traditional justice, allowing for social reconciliation rather than retribution.[45]

In light of these reflections, there is a need to account for and explore the nature and role of socio-religious norms and precepts as local peacebuilding mechanisms in the community reintegration component of DDR measures. This is critical as scholars have argued that community-led measures are a rarity in most DDR responses, and even when they exist, we lack empirical evidence of their nuanced nature.[46] Using Nigeria as a case, I build on these existing debates and explore the role of *Sulhu*, a locally grounded conflict mediation mechanism in building peace through community-reintegration of DDR processes. The next section conceptualises Sulhu.

Conceptualising sulhu

Despite being explicitly anchored in the Islamic jurisprudence's principles of forgiveness and mediation, the notion of *Sulhu* as a conflict resolution mechanism, has been shaped and influenced by the Hausa-Fulani socio-cultural norms. Put simply, *Sulhu*, foregrounded on the adaptation of norms, religion, and local culture, exemplifies what

[39]Johanna Söderström, 'The Political Consequences of Reintegration Programmes in Current Peace-Building: A Framework For Analysis', *Conflict, Security & Development* 13, no. 1 (2013): 87–116; and Anders Nilsson, 'Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies' (2005).
[40]Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, 'Community Counts: The Social Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Colombia', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35, no. 2 (2018): 132–53.
[41]Sharif, 'A Critical Review of Evidence'.
[42]Phil Clark, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice Without Lawyers* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[43]Ibid; Jeremy Sarkin, 'The Tension Between Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Politics, Human Rights, Due Process and the Role of the Gacaca Courts in Dealing with the Genocide', *Journal of African Law* 45, no. 2 (2001): 143–72.
[44]Tim Allen, 'The International Criminal Court and the Invention of Traditional Justice in Northern Uganda', *Politique Africaine* 4 (2007): 147–66.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Özerdem, 'Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration', 225–36.

anthropologists and theologians describe as syncretism.[47] Encompassing forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, social and communal harmony, *Sulhu* aptly captures Emile Durkheim's thesis on the interplay of cultural entity, societal tradition and socioreligious dimension.[48] *Sulhu* has emerged a distinctively peculiar local approach to conflict mediation which reflects the local socio-religious reality of northern Nigeria. This distinctive peculiarity also enhanced its relevance in peacebuilding activities.

The Islamic principles of reconciliation and justice deeply foreground *Sulhu'*ss moral framework within conflict resolution. These principles draw from the etymology of Islam and the premium that it places on the virtue of peace-making. Scholars contend that these principles solely originate from the diverse hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), requiring all Muslims to reconcile and peacefully reach a consensus for resolving disagreements and conflicts. There are also arguments that the principles are linked to the mediation of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in the tensions between Meccan and Medinan communities in the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah in 1620 AD.[49] The mediation guided by these principles and its grounding on the tenets of forgiveness and restitution, constituted *Sulhu*'s moral framework within conflict resolution.

Despite its religious foundation, *Sulhu* has evolved into a syncretic conflict resolution mechanism due to its interaction with Hausa-Fulani cultural norms and practices. This perspective, which underscores the centrality of religion and spirituality to African socio-cultural societies and realities, also chimes well with scholarly arguments which ascertains the pertinence of religion to the affective and cognitive dimension of societal stability.[50] A similar phenomenon of syncretism is also recorded in Christian religion in Southern Nigeria.[51] However, the integration of Islamic jurisprudential principles into the Hausa-Fulani cultural context of Northern Nigeria resulted in the refinement of the *Sulhu* approach into a syncretic mechanism through two main methods. The first is the syncretisation of practices. The arrival of Islam influenced adjustments to the practice and structure of dispute resolution, as previous pre-Islamic activities were carried out by traditional community leaders (Bulama). However, following the entry of Islam, religious scholars (Ulama) gained prominence in the Hausa-Fulani traditional hierarchical structure, and thus their roles in dispute resolutions became more entrenched. The second is the syncretising of norms and principles. The Hausa-Fulani cultural norm of communal cohesion and collective responsibility added flavour to dispute and conflict resolution when it came in contact with Islam's principles of social justice, fairness, equity, and the collective welfare of society.[52] From this perspective, *Sulhu* shapes up as a syncretic mechanism that resonates with local communities, reflecting the nuanced interactions between cultural norms and religious principles.

Further reflecting *Sulhu*'s syncretism is its nature of incorporating dual but complementary meanings of the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation, drawing,

[47] Jacob Pandian, 'Syncretism in Religion', *Anthropos* H. 1 (2006): 229–233; Charles Stewart, 'Syncretism and its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture', *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62.
[48] Emile Durkheim, 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', in *Social Theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 241–44.
[49] Author's fieldwork notes; Interview with Islamic cleric, Abuja, May 2023; and DIN, 'Peaceful Pathways', 2023.
[50] Diane Simpson, 'Syncretism in Two African Cultures', *The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (1995).
[51] John DY. Peel, 'Syncretism and Religious Change', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, no. 2 (1968): 121–41.
[52] Izabela Will, 'Hausa Culture, Society and Conceptualization of the World Exposed in Gestures', in *Recurrent Gestures of Hausa Speakers*, ed. Isabel Will (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 57–84.

respectively, from its theological foundations and cultural traditions. *Sulhu* bases its theological underpinning on the notion of forgiveness, tracing its etymology to the spiritual injunction that prioritises mercy and compassion. Forgiveness, as captured in the Holy Quran and the hadiths, encompasses human forgiveness as well as divine forgiveness from Allah.[53] From this perspective, the theological logic of *Sulhu* frames forgiveness as a moral and spiritual imperative that occurs at both divine and interpersonal levels.[54] It is worth noting that both framing and the practice of forgiveness interplay with each other. For instance, forgiveness at an interpersonal level, which requires warring sides to relinquish the right to retaliation, also relies on the practice of divine forgiveness and the belief that everyone has made mistakes or wronged someone at some point and has sought forgiveness from a divine source.[55]

By an extension of same logic, *Sulhu*'s principle of reconciliation draws from a dominant Hausa-Fulani cultural norm of communal and social harmony.[56] Within this cultural perspective, reconciliation is understood as a collective endeavour aimed at reconstructing previously existing ties and restoring the social balance of the society which has been disrupted by conflict. It is further underlined by the drive towards community cohesion through reverence for traditional structures of leadership. The integration of these meanings of forgiveness reconciliation, enables *Sulhu* to resonate with faith-based communities, align with local customs and traditions, and bridge religious and secular divides, thereby increasing not only Sulhu's acceptability as a unique approach for conflict resolution, but also improving its applicability to varying conflict context.

Conflict Resolution mechanisms in Northern Nigeria embody bottom-up approaches that draw on either cultural or religious principles[57]; thus, implying the ambivalent role of religion in both social cleavages and social bonds.[58] Despite the growing body of research acknowledging it as a mechanism for mediation, *Sulhu*'s conceptual and theoretical development as a peacebuilding tool within the broader debate of local peacebuilding remains largely undertheorized. Hence, the article posits that Sulhu provides a nuanced approach answering the ontological question of 'what is the local' in local peacebuilding, as it typifies a localised approach that draws from empirical realties and

[53]Ibid; DIN, 'Peaceful Pathways', 2023.
[54]Author's fieldwork notes; Interview with Islamic cleric, Abuja, May 2023.
[55]Ibid; DIN, 'Peaceful Pathways', 2023.
[56]See note 52 above.
[57]Jacinta Nwaka, 'Faith-Based Actors and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Jos and Kaduna, Nigeria: 2000–15', *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review* 10, no. 1 (2020): 50–71; Portia Roelofs, 'Contesting Localisation in Interfaith Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria', *Oxford Development Studies* 48, no. 4 (2020): 373–86; Abdul Raufu Mustapha, Adam Higazi, J. Lar, and K. Chromy, 'Fear & Violence in Central Nigeria', *Creed & Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations & Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria* (2018): 225–68.
[58]Kate Meagher, 'Complementarity, Competition and Conflict: Informal Enterprise and Religious Conflict in Northern Nigeria', in *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, eds. Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt (New York: James Currey, 2018), 189, doi:10.1017/9781787442375; John N. Paden, *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, eds., *Creed & Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations & Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*. Vol. 11 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2018); Kingsley L. Madueke, 'From Neighbours to Deadly Enemies: Excavating Landscapes of Territoriality and Ethnic Violence in Jos, Nigeria', *Journal of contemporary African studies* 36, no. 1 (2018): 87–102; and Kingsley L. Madueke, 'The Emergence and Development of Ethnic Strongholds and Frontiers of Collective Violence in Jos, Nigeria', *African Studies Review* 62, no. 4 (2019): 6–30. This article does not rationalise violent extremism in this context as product of local social or religious values, as that would be tantamount to reproducing Islamophobic tendencies in Nigeria. See: Promise Frank Ejiofor, 'Decolonising Islamophobia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 13 (2023): 2863–92.

contextual knowledge. *Sulhu* demonstrates that 'the local' in local peacebuilding is a dynamic interplay of religious precepts, cultural norms, and everyday practices that reflect distinctive peculiarities of context. By integrating *Sulhu* into the broader debate of local peacebuilding, we can uncover valuable insights and strategies that are culturally relevant, inclusive, and effective. The succeeding section gives a bird's-eye view of DDR in Nigeria.

Contextual background: DDR in Nigeria

The multifaceted dynamics and nature of conflict and violence across various regions of Nigeria prompted the adoption of different measures aimed at ending conflict and ensuring peace.[59] Among these varying responses was the government's embrace of interventions that mirrored DDR processes. While DDR was first introduced in 2009 by the federal government DDR programme to initiate the peacebuilding process for the Niger Delta violence in 2009 through the post amnesty programme (PAP),[60] it has also been deployed in addressing terrorism.

In response to the terrorist activities of Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) in the north-eastern region of Nigeria, the federal government launched a military operation exemplifying DDR in 2016. The measure, known as 'Operation Safe Corridor', aims to de-radicalise, rehabilitate, and reintegrate repentant Boko Haram insurgents into society.[61] Operating as a facility-based programme in Gombe State, Nigeria, scholars highlight the inadequacy of the DDR operation safe corridor programme in successfully facilitating the reintegration of ex-combatants back into communities.[62] Specifically, as previously mentioned in relation to the PAP, scholars emphasise that the exclusionary nature of the Safe Corridor measure is one of the factors hindering the reintegration of the increasing number of ex-combatants in northeast Nigeria.

In 2021, the Borno State government launched the Borno State Community-Based Reconciliation and Reintegration Policy. The Borno Model for Integrated Management of Mass Exits provides a broader institutional framework for this policy and seeks to manage the reintegration challenges posed by ex-combatants.[63] While the Borno Model embodies a sub-national approach to the DDR process, one of its overarching goals is post-conflict reconstruction and ensuring sustainable peace.[64] The model suggests that 'an extensive community-driven, community-owned process of truth and reconciliation, healing, and social cohesion that supports effective transformation and prevents local

[59]For other conflict resolution and peace measures of the Nigerian government, see: Joshua Akintayo, 'Whole-of-Society Approach or Manufacturing Intelligence? Making Sense of State-CSO Relation in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2024): 1–25.

[60]Olukunle Ojeleye, 'The Application of Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) at the Sub-National level in the Niger Delta', *Civil wars* 13, no. 2 (2011): 141–56; Tarila Marclint Ebiede, 'Instability in Nigeria's Niger Delta: The Post Amnesty Programme and Sustainable Peace-Building', *Peace and Security Series. Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Shara Africa* (2017).

[61]Michael I. Ugwueze, Elias C. Ngwu, and Freedom C. Onuoha, 'Operation Safe Corridor Programme and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Fighters in Nigeria', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 6 (2022): 1229–48.

[62]Ibid; Saheed Babajide Owonikoko, '"Take them to Government House or Aso Rock": Community Receptivity to Reintegration of Operation Safe Corridor's Deradicalised Ex-Boko Haram Members in Northeastern Nigeria', *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2015884.

[63]Borno State Government, 'Operationalising the Borno Model for Integrated Management of the Mass Exit', 2022.

[64]Ibid.

conflict and recidivism' should facilitate sustainable peacebuilding.[65] In this regard, premium is placed on bottom-up approaches to peace as the go-to mechanism for dealing with top-down federal government-led strategies and addressing the 'looming question of "*genuineness of repentance*" by those leaving the conflict' that it generates.[66] However, there has been little effort to analytically capture the nuanced nature of these bottom-up, community-driven peace approaches. Broader arguments in the literature poignantly reinforce this point, emphasising the importance of community-specific norms in understanding conflict and post-conflict issues in Nigeria.[67] These debates within peacebuilding scholarship while highlighting the paucity of insights from the global south, underscores the significance of giving priority to marginalised alternative approaches to peace-making, which are spearheaded by national governments and sub-national local and indigenous traditions.[68] Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the Nigerian context, as there is currently a dearth of studies on the dynamics of bottom-up local approaches to building peace in conflict context in North-eastern Nigeria. The next two sections discuss the methods utilised in the article, followed by an analysis of the empirical findings.

Methods

This qualitative article utilises both empirical and secondary data. The secondary data draws from academic and policy scholarship on peacebuilding and DDR, as well as Nigeria's Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policy documents and DDR guidelines. The secondary data is supplemented by primary data gathered from ethnographic interviews conducted during the author's PhD research fieldwork in Abuja, Adamawa, Borno, and Gombe States between October 2022 and September 2023, both physically and virtually, with the assistance of local field assistants recruited by the author. The research assistants are native speakers of Hausa and Kanuri languages, the primary languages of communication in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. Thus, they transcribed the interviews in the English language. We conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with forty stakeholders, including Islamic religious clerics, community leaders, heads of community-based organisations, programme managers of community-based organisations, state security actors, and government and international non-governmental actors on PCVE and DDR. The interviews were structured and unstructured, depending on the type of respondent. However, questions were drawn thematically on the roles of the respondent in DDRR, the nature of the Federal government of Nigeria's DRR programme and the Borno state government's model, the

[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid.
[67]Joy Onyesoh, 'Umuada: A Sociopolitical Institution for Peacebuilding and Conflict Management in Nigeria', in *Gender in Peacebuilding,* ed. Elisabeth Purl, Christelle Ritual, Rahel Kunz, Mimidoo Achakpa, Henri Myrttinen, Joy Onyesoh, Arifah Rahmawatti and Wening Udasmoro (Brill Nijhoff, 2021), 137–52; MaryAnne Iwara, *Hybrid Peacebuilding Approaches in Africa: Harnessing Complementary Parallels* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2021); Emeka Thaddues Njoku and Isaac Dery, 'Gendering Counter-Terrorism: Kunya and the Silencing of Male Victims of CRSV in Northeastern Nigeria', *African Studies Review* (2023): 1–18; and Benjamin Maiangwa, *Peace (Re)building Initiatives: Insights from Southern Kaduna, Nigeria* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2021), doi:10.37805/pn2021.22.lpbi.
[68]Neufeldt et al., "Gaps in Knowledge About Local Peacebuilding'; Emeka Njoku and Jonathan Fisher, 'The UK's Approaches to Peacebuilding: Literature Review' (2022).

involvement of community leaders and religious clerics in its DDDRRR,[69] the challenges of these respective programmes, and the efforts in addressing some of the challenges. The research received ethics approval from the University of Kent's ethics review committee.

Findings

Bottom-up local approaches to peacebuilding avails a variety of possibilities including centralising the views, perspectives and agency of people directly affected by violence and conflict. Apart from prioritising local agency, bottom-up peace approaches can enhance the understanding of how peace manifests in various emancipatory forms that mirror contextually acceptable social precepts, thereby facilitating and fostering sustainable peace. The above demonstrates the centrality of locally grounded cultural sensitivities and norms as encompassing local peacebuilding activities and practices that Mac Ginty articulated.[70]

Findings from interviews point to the importance placed on the fundamental role that principles of reconciliation and forgiveness hold in *Sulhu*. Participants discussed the notion of forgiveness at considerable length, often showing three components – divine, interpersonal, and individual forgives – and demonstrating their interconnectedness. Forgiveness, a core attribute which *Sulhu* epitomises, operates along three dimensions. At the core of *Sulhu*'s forgiveness paradigm is divine forgiveness. The underlying logic is that divine forgiveness provides the ontological blueprint, interpersonal forgiveness delivers the pragmatic mechanism, and individual forgiveness ensures the process is personally internalised. For community survivors, divine reverence for the sanctity of this creed between a perpetrator and their divine creator, shapes the trajectory of human forgiveness and reacceptance of offenders, while also reassuring their confidence in the genuineness of their repentance and the overall peace process. Further elucidating the primacy of divinity-centred forgiveness to *Sulhu*'s local peace, an Ulama stated that:

> In various verses of the Quran, Allah has called on us to forgive and reconcile those that wrong us and are in dispute and in doing that we must ensure that justice is done, and peace guaranteed. . . we should always follow Allah's instruction in our society, because Allah said that, in whatever case when you have crisis, Sulhu is the best way. [71]

The above reflection by the participant not only highlights the nexus between religion and culture/tradition in shaping everyday Nigerian life, but it also points to how *Sulhu* exemplifies the syncretic nature of Northern Nigeria. Specifically, the participant's reference to the Quran as a guidance for social conduct reflects that *Sulhu* is not just a human social activity but also religious, deeply ingrained in the spirituality of communities. Moreover, by designating *Sulhu* as the 'best way' for conflict resolution, the reflections deepen the understanding of the extent to which the fusion of religious and

[69]It is important to note that most study participants describe the Borno model as DDRRR- demobilisation, deradicalisation, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and reintegration.
[70]See note 34 above.
[71]Interviews with Islamic clerics, Gombe state and Maiduguri, June 2023.

cultural norms resonates with local contextual dynamics.[72] Specifically, the participant here draws upon the component of divine forgiveness, as the ultimate model of forgiveness, as well as a pathway to reconciliation, which is intimately intertwined with interpersonal and individual forgiveness. The excerpt also demonstrates that forgiveness is not merely a human construct but a spiritual principle that emanates from a higher, divine realm. Although there is no indication here of the inevitability of smooth sailing reconciliation following the process of divine forgiveness, the assumption here, clearly, is that divine component serves as the foundational platform that guarantees the process of reconciliation. The views of survivor of violent extremism, who also doubles as a local Islamic head, commonly known as Ulama, in one of the communities in Borno helps provide further nuance for a deeper comprehension of the interconnection between forgiveness and reconciliation *Sulhu*. In the words of the participant:

> . . . A friend of mine was protesting that someone who killed his father is being brought back into the community and he is living a normal life without prosecution. And there are lots of them who suffered the same fate with my friend, but the irony is those who perpetrate crime against them are living in the same community without being punished and without perpetrators showing remorse or seeking forgiveness. It is difficult to do reintegration without reconciliation and forgiveness.[73]

Underlying this viewpoint is the Hausa-Fulani cultural expectations around forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation within a community. These expectations, which prioritise communal harmony and stability over individualised retributions, thus informs the importance of reconciliation over revenge, or punishments of legal justice system. Furthermore, the excerpt reflects what several other participants conveyed during interviews: that community reintegration efforts in the DDR cannot succeed without reconciliation and justice. Specifically, it reveals the deep interconnectedness of layers of reconciliation and forgiveness, along with the ethos of shared communal values. In this sense, for interviewees, fundamental tensions exist when victims and perpetrators share similar space and are bound by shared cultural systems and norms. This tensions potentially aggravate when reintegration is treated as a purely technical or practical matter that is divulged from cultural sensitivities. Thus, the excerpt underscores the interconnectedness between reconciliation and forgiveness, as well as it cyclical non-linear relationship to foregrounding tenets of peace that community reintegration efforts exemplifies. Implicitly, individual forgiveness enables interpersonal reconciliation, community reconciliation supports successful reintegration; divine forgiveness facilitates bother personal and communal healing. Hence, facilitating successful reintegration which reinforces reconciliation. By underlining the criticality of reconciliation to community reintegration, the principle of forgiveness as embedded within *Sulhu* is construed as not simply a spiritual act of pardoning, but as a complex, multi-dimensional social practice that cascades through human relationships to individual healing and transformation.

This finds echoes in the thoughts of another survivor from one of the communities who reflected on the pertinence of reconciliation in facilitating peaceful co-existence of survivors and the reintegration of perpetrators, stating that:

[72]See note 52 above.
[73]Interview with Ulama in Jere, March 2023.

> '. . .If you are providing reintegration support and you have not been able to reconcile the community, how will beneficiaries, both the perpetrators and the victims, work together to access such services you are providing'.[74]

The narrative above highlight a critical facet of socio-cultural norms of the Hausa-Fulani – the principle of communal and collective responsibility.[75] This norm, while understanding conflict as a collective issue, also sees reconciliation and healing as a shared process that involves both perpetrators and victims. Therefore, the restoration of communal balance and relationships is integral to collective healing. Furthermore, the quote also demonstrates the crucial importance of aligning the peace restoration and building process with local sensitivities and beliefs, as defined, and understood by the people themselves. Put differently, community reintegration and peace processes are local and sustainable to the extent that the socio-contextual agency of locales and community members are prioritised. Explicitly, there is a strong sense among survivors in communities that ties the notion of forgiveness – divine forgiveness – to communal harmony and collective existence which is rooted in reconciliation.[76] Thus, understanding *Sulhu*'s local peace within this context goes beyond a simplistic procedural or technical process, but requires looking at the chiming of spiritual and social process which seeks to restore social harmony and rebuild communal fabric. Seen in this sense, interview participants tended to view and exercise agency via *Sulhu* through the syncretic tenets – mixing of religious and cultural beliefs – that it embodies. To put it in another way, the rationale for prioritising Sulhu as a local peace approach might be the consequence of the mixing and re-construction of religious and cultural norms, a phenomenon which scholars argue strongly influences the Nigeria's social and religious landscape.[77] Thus, I argue that the syncretism that shapes the sociology of northern Nigeria, and Nigeria broadly, is crucial not only for understanding conflict dynamics and conflict resolution, but also plays a significant role in peace processes. Recounting the predominance syncretism in Northern Nigeria, and its importance in reintegration, an Islamic cleric stated thus:

> *'The reintegration process will benefit more if more focus is placed on religious and cultural values because that was the way we are been brought up in this part of the country'.*[78]

This level of interest in socio-cultural mechanisms of conflict mediation and peacebuilding is itself not a bad thing, and literature on peacebuilding processes in fact seems to suggest the need for a reinvigoration of localisation of peace process, involving bringing culturally appropriate norms as described by peace users into peace practices.[79]

The preceding discussion underscores the critical interplay between religious and cultural logics in foregrounding local peacebuilding efforts and practices, as this exemplifies an important avenue through which end-users of peace process exercise their agential capacity. Nigeria, like most African context thrives on norms that see conflicts as a disruption to the delicate social balance, and as such should be approached holistically. In this sense, religion and culture play cogent roles in the everyday of Nigerians, and most

[74]Interview with leader of CBO, Maiduguri, May 2023.
[75]See note 52 above.
[76]Interviews with Ulamas, Bulamas, and other community members in Jere, Konduga, and Maffa LGAs, March-May 2023.
[77]Steven Pierce, 'Identity, performance, and secrecy: gendered life and the" modern" in northern Nigeria', *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 539–65; and Peel, 'Syncretism and Religious Change'.
[78]Interview with Ulama in Gombe, February 2023.
[79]Roelofs, "Contesting Localisation'.

especially Northern Nigerians, and it is difficult to trivialise their significance due to their pertinence in shaping reactions to socio-political environments and social problems. The discussion further highlights the significance of syncretic belief systems and precepts in influencing local approaches to peacebuilding through DDR, primarily attributed to canons which the *Sulhu* approach embodies. These canons as discussed in this section – reconciliation and forgiveness – not only constitute the premise of the *Sulhu* approach, but also capture the emotional and relational dimension that shapes the dynamics of the socio-cultural context. Consequently, their prioritisation provides avenue to address the everyday infractions such as stiff resistance, community rejection, absence of trust, suspicion, and resentment, that arise from efforts at reintegrating ex-combatants into communities. Thus, ultimately influencing overall peacebuilding processes in North-eastern Nigeria. The linkage between religious and cultural norms in the practice of Sulhu as a peacebuilding tool in the North-east is also consistent with Appleby's assertion that 'a new form of conflict transformation – "religious peace building" – is taking shape on the ground, in and across local communities plagued by violence'.[80]

Justice, Sulhu and local peace in DDR

As highlighted earlier in the section on the conceptual discussion on *Sulhu*, justice is noted as one of the canons of *Sulhu*. The underlying logic of justice within the framework of *Sulhu*, emphasises balance, embodying a holistic understanding of fairness, accountability, and the restoration of rights. Thus, understood within the context and discourse of local peace, justice approaches are local to the extent that affected communities have agency and power, and their lived realities are centred. Regardless of the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness to the reintegration efforts, without incorporating tenets of justice, peacebuilding remains potentially idealistic. This was the view of most interview participants; as majority highlighted that justice constituted both the foundation and the guiding principle for achieving sustainable peace, especially in the community reintegration efforts. They linked the process of reconciliation to justice and highlighted its relevance to either attaining or undercutting social cohesion and peace as the excerpts below exemplify:

> 'Peace will become valuable because we know and have experienced the opposite of it. Also, it can only be sustainable when justice and equity is served'.[81]

> 'So that was quite a skewed perspective around transitional justice. You know that gives a sense of complete forgiveness without people being held accountable to, I mean, human rights violation, they have caused. So communities questions primed around, so how about us? You know, we have been violated, we are made to stay back in communities, and you know, an organization is just coming out to talk about forgive, forgive, forgive. How about those who actually have committed?[82]

Notable in interviews with participants were two dominant framings through which the nexus between justice and local peacebuilding was understood: retributive and

[80]Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 7.
[81]Interview with head of local CBO, Adamawa, November 2022.
[82]Interview with program officer CBO, Maiduguri, May 2023.

restorative justice. Most common amongst participants was a conception of justice along the retributive tropes. In the words of one participant:

> Some of the things I have highlighted because even when we were working on it, there were serious opposition to such a program by community members. Because they feel that it should be an eye for an eye. So people are fixated with retributive justice rather than restorative justice.[83]

This finds echoes in the views of another participant, a community survivor who extensively reflected that:

> How can those who brought this suffering upon us, burning our houses, killing our children, and burning our properties be provided with things and we who are the victims have no support? If they won't provide support, then we won't accept them[84]

Underpinning the above quotes are various elements of Islamic notion of justice that are embedded within *Sulhu*. Specifically, we see elements of promoting equity; an approach that ensures that all parties receive fair treatment and that local peace resolution addresses power imbalances that can furthe r exacerbate injustice. Additionally, the discourse encompass elements that narrow-in on the importance of acknowledging the worth of individuals and communities affected by the conflict, ensuring their voices are heard, and affirming their rights—this speaks to the *Sulhu*'s justice approach that emphasise restoring dignity. Furthermore, the quotes also underlines the pertinence of addressing grievances of victims and ensuring that perpetrators acknowledge and make amends to the harms that they have caused.

Thinking of justice in retributive terms, as we have seen is a popular feature that shapes *Sulhu*'s local peace approach and community reintegration. However, this conception was not entirely uncontested in interviews, as we also encountered framings of justice along restorative tropes. In an extensive reflection on the intracommunal relation between victims and perpetrators, a participant offered the following:

> 'The existing relationship between terrorists and the community members is a warm one because since the reintegration of the returnees into this community there has never been any issue between me and other people in the community reason been that the returnees are respectful and calm in fact community members are delighted with the way the returnees conduct themselves, that was the only secret behind the peaceful coexistence.[85]

In another refection on the importance of restorative justice, another participant opines thus:

> Like I said earlier, in my community, when the terrorist were brough back to be reintegrated, we all sit down together all the community members. The boko haram terrorist asked for forgiveness from everyone there. And these are boys that we know, they live with us, they are like children, so I urged community members for tolerance and to allow peace because we are all one community. I say to them that it is not about the terrorist alone, it is also about us all. We as a community have been offended and we need to come together to reconcile[86]

[83]Interview with Program officer of Maiduguri based CSO in Abuja, November 2022.
[84]Interview with survivor in Gwoza, January 2023.
[85]Interview with Ulama in Maiduguri Municpal, March 2023.
[86]Interview with Bulama in Konduga, April 2023.

These viewpoints, while underscoring the principle of restorative justice, also highlight how this principle emphasises communal responsibility, social healing, rebuilding relationships above punitive measures that enhance justice. Thus, emphasising this as one of the ways to ensure sustainable peace in the community reintegration effort through the *Sulhu*'s approach to local peace further demonstrates the pertinence of foregrounding local peace in syncretic mix of religion and culture of socio-political contexts. By highlighting the webs of interconnectedness and shared identity of personhood and humanness, the viewpoints underline how detaching either cultural or religious norms cultural or religious norms that shape socio-political contexts from local peace approaches, risk perpetuating ahistorical and contextual approaches to peace. Thus, this study builds upon studies by Clark and Sarkin on the role of gacaca courts in post-genocide Rwanda and Allen on the Mato Oput in Uganda.[87] These studies revealed that locally grounded mechanisms and approaches, such as reconciliation rituals and localised transitional justice systems, were significantly crucial and ultimately successful in restoring peace and ensuring justice in comparison to liberal practices and systems.

Reconsidering DDR peace efforts through Sulhu approach

This article is not meant to fetishise or romanticise *Sulhu*, nor to underestimate the complex multifaceted dynamics of the Nigerian conflict landscape, but rather shift the gaze on how to approach peace locally in line with syncretic ideals – cultural, religious, and traditional dynamics – that shape peace context. Rather than continually approach DDR peacebuilding efforts from a top-down perspective, and a perpetrator-centred project that fracture communal living, *Sulhu* local peace approach focus on community bottom-up driven approaches that ensures the preservation of communal relationships. By recognising the relational and nuanced nature of conflict and violence, as well as the seeming inadequacy of liberal western approaches in its resolution, *Sulhu* offers a transformative framework, grounded in socio-cultural norms, centring community agency, indigenous knowledge, and holistic healing. This presents enables a more sustainable, flexible, adaptive, comprehensive, and cost-effective peacebuilding intervention mechanism.

However, despite these evidential arguments on the prospects that *Sulhu* as a local approach to DDR peacebuilding efforts, uncritical adopting it risk perpetuating what Ware and Ware describe as the dark side of peace, where 'power simply becomes contested (or conceded) non-violently, rather than inequalities being resolved'.[88] As the argument in the article as shown the realities of the socio-political context where peacebuilding efforts are proposed is a vital variable that shapes it comprehensively both positively and negatively. Thus, I argue that an uncritical appropriation of localised *Sulhu* approaches in the national DDR process risk potentially becoming spaces where power relations and imbalances are further reappropriated, reasserted, reinterpreted, reinscribed, and renegotiated, in various guises, and by varying actors. Put differently, it

[87]Clark, *The Gacaca Courts;* Sarkin, 'The Tension Between Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda'; and Tim Allen, 'The International Criminal Court and the invention of traditional justice in Northern Uganda', *Politique africaine* 4 (2007): 147–66.

[88]Anthony Ware and Vicki-Ann Ware, 'Everyday Peace: Rethinking Typologies of Social Practice and Local Agency', *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 3 (2022): 222–41.

risks becoming a playground for playing politics (macro and micro) with peace, and in the process exacerbating the issue it was intended to address.

Conclusion

This article expands the theoretical understanding of local peacebuilding by providing answers to the 'ontological' question, 'what is the local' in local peacebuilding. It achieves this by highlighting the importance of cultural and religious norms – syncretism – as one of the predominant interpretation to make sense of 'the local' in local peacebuilding. The article acknowledges that the discourse on the local approach to peacebuilding has yielded a significant amount of scholarship, which has broadened our existing understanding of 'the local' and facilitated conceptual discussions. However, despite this scholarship, the conceptual imprecision surrounding 'the local' persists, particularly due to the lack of empirical attempts to understand its dynamics. Critiques from critical peacebuilding scholarship on this imprecision have tanked at questions-ontological, epistemological, and methodological – without further attempts at answering them and elucidating 'what the local is in local peacebuilding'. Thus, the article offers a critical reading of critical peacebuilding scholarship and urges that boundaries of understanding on the local turn to peacebuilding move beyond the realm of questioning to answers that draw from empirically driven knowledge. Furthermore, the article contributes theoretically by conceptualising *Sulhu*, thereby advancing new directions in the ontological understanding of local peacebuilding and a bottom-top approach to conflict resolution. In doing so, the article argues that future studies can explore the analytic utility of the concept of *Sulhu* as a counter-narrative to terrorist ideologies and also in helping understand what vernacular security means.

Additionally, drawing on community reintegration in the DDR efforts in northeastern Nigeria, the article underscores *Sulhu*'s relevance as locally grounded cultural and religious norms in building peace locally. Embodying localised practices of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice, *Sulhu*'s prowess in aiding communal healing, social reconstruction, and transitional justice is intricately linked to the central tenets of traditional and religious cosmology in Northern Nigeria, as well as its role in sociological dynamics, including the nature of conflict and its resolution. Thus, the ideological tenets that *Sulhu* embodies, despite being at variance with the radical, extreme ideology of terrorist fighters, could potentially become flexible and amenable for fighters to adopt. Furthermore, the contextual nuances of conflict, its resolution dynamics, and prevailing socio-cultural norms and precepts offer a significant opportunity for the mainstreaming of *Sulhu*'s localized practice as a mandatory component of the national DDR process. This article is far from conclusive. Rather, it seeks to shift attention to the need for more research that unpacks community-driven peacebuilding through the Borno Model's DDR efforts in the Northeast. Thus, there is a need for further study that answers broader epistemological and methodological questions of 'the local' vis-à-vis the Borno Model and its claim of local peacebuilding.

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