

INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON SOCIAL COHESION IN MULTI-ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: The current study aimed to shed light on the loss of social cohesion among the heterogeneous communities in Nigeria, especially in the context of religious affiliation that is becoming more and more intertwined with ethnic identity and urban settlement patterns to shape social trust, intergroup relations, and collective identity. The research tried to deconstruct the role of religion in cohesion in both Northern and Southern Nigeria and to determine whether religious institutions are more integration agents or division agents. Procedure: Data were obtained using a range of secondary sources, such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and credible reports based on the qualitative research design based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). These were systematically content analysed to draw common themes pertaining to identity politics, spatial segregation and religious mobilisation. Result: The results show that religious identity has significant effect on social categorisation processes, which solidifies in-group solidarity and undermines out-group trust, especially in conflict-prone northern metropolises. The ethno-religious segregation is frequently reflected in the patterns of urban settlement, thus limiting the contact between the groups and making them more suspicious of each other. A relatively tolerant climate is present in Southern Nigeria, but indigene-settler politics and elite manipulation of identity remain a source of cohesion. The religious institutions have two facets: there are those actors who deepen divisions by using politicised rhetoric, and there are those who support reconciliation by interfaith dialogue and community-based peace efforts. Conclusion: Religion is not necessarily divisive or necessarily integrative; the effects of religion depend on governance systems, framing of leadership, and the presence of constructive opportunities of intergroup contact. Recommendation: The paper suggests inclusive city planning, systematic interfaith dialogue, and specific governance reforms to reduce identity-based political manipulation, which will help to promote long-term social cohesion.

Keywords: *Religion; social cohesion; ethno-religious identity; urban settlement; Nigeria*

Introduction

The concepts of religion, social cohesion, multi-ethnicity, rural-urban migration, urban insecurity, human security, and globalisation are interlaced and define the realities of the contemporary Nigerian realities. Religion is the term used to describe the systematised belief and practice by which communities comprehend moral order and transcendence. Social cohesion refers to the level of trust, solidarity, collective identity and inclusion in the society. Multi-ethnic communities are social entities that are made up of different ethnic groups living within the common political territory. Religion and ethnicity tend to intertwine in Nigeria, a greatly plural society, which defines the identity politics and belonging. In the recent scholarship, the importance of ethno-religious identities in shaping integration and exclusion processes, in particular, in politically tense settings, is emphasized (Njoku, 2025; Suleiman et al., 2024).

Although religion may foster moral capital, charity and dialogue between groups, it may also help cement boundaries in case of instrumentalisation to political mobilisation. Recent research on

identity politics shows that youth nationality is often mediated by religious and ethnic identities, thus influencing the national integration (Akinyetun, 2025). In a similar vein, the ethnically dominant and democratic consolidation are analyzed on the basis of how religious symbolism and rhetoric can both reinforce or disintegrate civic trust in multi-ethnic states (Rosenje et al., 2024; Yahaya and Ibrahim, 2025). In this mosaic, social cohesion is not only a dream but also a battleground. It is the interaction of faith, identity and diversity against this intricate web of faith that academic interest is increasingly focusing on how religion is functioning not as an individual belief system but as a social system organizing relationships within the heterogeneous Nigerian environment.

These dynamics are further complicated by urbanisation and migration. Rural-urban migration is the migration of population out of agricultural areas to urban areas in pursuit of economic prospects, whereas urban insecurity is increased vulnerability to crime, violence and social political instabilities in urban locations. Human security extends the concept of protection to include not only military matters but also economic stability, social inclusion and liberty. The demographic diversity in cities of Nigeria that rapidly globalise has led to the contact of different religious and ethnic groups due to the process of migration. The study of the settlement pattern in the Kaduna metropolis indicates that the spatial clustering of the groups on religious basis may either lead to peaceful cohabitation or mistrust based on the governance and the interaction between the groups (Adamu et al., 2024). Greater analyses of multi-ethnic society public policy suggest that where the political structures are unable to oversee pluralism fairly, religious identities can serve as sources of resentment (Abbo, 2024). These processes have been enhanced by globalisation which is defined by transnational information, capital and ideological flows, spreading the world narratives of religion to local conflicts and solidarities. As a result, the issue of urban insecurity is not only a matter of crime but it is equally a matter of poor social networks among the various communities. Migration convergence and global influences and politicised religiosity bring up burning questions on how human security can be maintained in a world of increased pluralism.

Empirical research studies on nexus of religion, politics and national cohesion in Nigeria show that there is an increased concern over the issue between 2020 and 2025. The studies on the democratic transitions and electoral behaviour indicate that the religious alignments play a major role in the perceptions of legitimacy and belonging (Ezedikachi, 2025; Uchegbu, 2024). Equally, studies on ethnic identity and state functionality warn that ongoing ethno-religious polarisation erodes the confidence in institutions and deteriorates the ability to endure as a people (Berebon and Ukolor, 2024). Meanwhile, there are also emerging research papers that underscore the integrative capacity of intercultural communication and youth involvement in overcoming sectarian boundaries (Oyewole et al., 2025; Emenike, 2025). These academic debates all point to the notion that religion in Nigeria does not necessarily divide but it can equally unite; its power lies in contextual control, socioeconomic fairness and the control of diversity. In the context of increasing rural-urban migration, the spreading urban insecurity and the overall trends of globalisation, the interpretation of religion with regard to social cohesion is invaluable in developing human security. It is in this intellectual and sociopolitical context that the current study was carried out with the aim of critically exploring how religion is playing a role in the social cohesion of multi-ethnic societies in Nigeria, whilst contextualizing the investigation in the broad context of migration, insecurity and the global transformation.

Statement of the problem

In the plural society in Nigeria, religion in its broadest sense as an integrated system of beliefs, symbols and practices, is focused on the sacred and thus it influences identity and the shared consciousness in Nigeria. The concept of the social cohesion as the level of trust, solidarity, inclusion,

and the feeling of belongingness of individuals belonging to a particular community is moderate in the situations characterized by ethnic and religious differences. Nigeria is a multiethnic federation with more than 250 ethnic connections and numerous religious customs with which it has always been struggling with tensions of faith and ethnicity coincidence.

Recent research has shown that ethno-religious identities still shape political alignment, electoral behaviour, and national integration perceptions and tend to strengthen boundary-making, instead of bridge-building (Njoku, 2025; Uchegbu, 2024). Religion is often instrumentalised in political and communal struggles, rather than being just a moral compass or source of social capital, which only intensified mistrust across the group lines. Religious affiliation may be a measure of rivalry and exclusion in the case of multi-ethnic communities, especially where economic resources are limited and the governing structure is ineffective. The continuity of sectarian discourses enhanced by media imagery and political discourse has increased fears of marginalisation and lack of equal representation. Such dynamics have a significant threat to social cohesion because the civic identity is overshadowed by the primitivism of smaller identities. The issue, then, is not the issue of religious diversity per se, but rather the mobilisation of religious differences in weak institutional forms. When the sense of communal belonging is viewed through the main prism of religion, the future of intergroup trust and collaborative coexistence is even more subject to doubt, which shatters the cornerstone on which the coherent multi-ethnic societies rely.

These issues have been heightened by urbanisation and migration, which have made diverse religious and ethnic communities interact more closely on a day to day basis on the contentious socio-economic grounds. The economic desire and the lack of security in the rural areas have led to the rural-urban migration that has turned the Nigerian cities into a thick carpet of cultural and religious multiculturalism and multi-religiousness. Although this diversity may facilitate intercultural communication, it has led to spatial segregation and identity-based agglomeration, which reflects rural division in urban neighbourhoods (Adamu et al., 2024).

In a number of metropolitan settings, the existence of settlement patterns that follow religious lines has restricted the cross-community interaction hence undermining bridging social capital. Simultaneously, the research on communal identity politics has shown that religious discourses are frequently used to justify land, political office, and communal resources claims, in particular, in the state of conflict (Suleiman et al., 2024). Such trend creates the loop where lack of security breeds suspicion and suspicion perpetuates segregation. So what can promote social cohesion in neighbourhoods which are informally defined by religious beliefs and mistrusts? Is it possible to have a common national identity in situations where religious affiliation is the search-light to political faith and socialization? These queries highlight the seriousness of the issue. The loss of interpersonal trust, which is augmented by unemployment among the youth and a deficient leadership system, preconditions a good platform that can be manipulated by extremist or divisive elements. The urban scene then turns into the place where integration is possible and the place of fragmentation at the same time, revealing the weakness of the multi-ethnic co-existence when being overwhelmed by politicised religiosity.

Moreover, the larger pattern of democratic government and national reconciliation remains one manifestation of the tension that has yet to be resolved based on the ethnic-religious differences. Empirical studies of identity politics in the recent election cycles prove that religious factors play an important role in shaping the voting preferences and perceptions of legitimacy among the voters, and frequently overshadow the policy-based assessment (Akinyetun, 2025; Uchegbu, 2024). These tendencies provoke the serious questions of whether democracies are building up inclusive

citizenship or unwillingly recreating sectarian divisions. At a time when the discourse of the broader population is flooded with the stories of us versus them, social cohesion is contingent instead of fixed.

Additionally, chronic ethno-religious wars undermine the belief in the state neutrality, disrupting the social contract that exists between different groups. Global flows of information and transnational religious movements worsen this predicament by increasing local grievances and redefining communal identities in the most unpredictable fashion. With the decrease of trust in institutions, informal religious networks can gain more power in the regulation of social life which complicates even more the construction of cross-cutting solidarities. The net effect is a society whereby cohesion is occasionally affected by bursts of violence, electoral anxiety and suspicion among the communities. It is in this context that this research work was conducted to seek the role of religion in social cohesion among multi-ethnic societies of Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1) analyze the influence of religious affiliation in shaping social trust, intergroup relations, and perceptions of collective identity in multi-ethnic communities in Nigeria.
- 2) examine the relationship between ethno-religious identity politics, urban settlement patterns, and social cohesion in Nigeria.
- 3) evaluate roles of religious institutions and actors in either fostering intergroup harmony or contributing to divisions within Nigeria's plural society.

Literature Review

Religion

Religion is one of the oldest and most debated concepts in the humanities and the social sciences; it is always defining the moral framework, group identities, and the political cultures in the societies. Since it has an impact not only on the personal faith but also on the life of the state, theorists have attempted to define it in a diversity of theoretical perspectives. At the substantive level, Taves (2020) sees religion as being viewed as a category that is formed by processes of specialness in which beliefs and practices are distinguished as sacred in particular cultural practices. Equally, Martin and Wiebe (2021) refer to religion as a contingent historical system of symbols and stories that orient communities to perceived transcendent realities.

Making a step towards a sociological perspective Baker et al. (2020) define religion as systematized forms of belief and practice, which create social solidarity and moral governance of groups. On the global and political level, Juergensmeyer (2023) defines religion as a system of ultimate meaning that may be able to mobilize collective action which can overlap with nationalism and identity politics. In the meantime, Woodhead (2022) focuses on lived religion, which he describes as daily practices and embodied experiences in the context of which people are negotiating faith, culture, and power structures. These definitions indicate that religion is more than two-dimensional: it is not only symbolic, institutional, experiential, and political. Both academic definitions emphasize the idea that religion cannot be simply defined as a belief in the supernatural, instead it involves the system of meanings, the rites, the group relations and moral authority.

In spite of these full-throdden conceptualizations, the modern arguments still show some gray areas. There are those concepts that give precedence to belief, and some to ritual practice; there are those that emphasize transcendence, and some social function or power relations. As an illustration, Taves (2020) is interested in cognitive and cultural mechanisms, and Baker et al. (2020) anticipate the ability of religion to organize social cohesiveness in the future. The central themes in Juergensmeyer (2023) and Woodhead (2022) are the mobilizing role of religion in the political arenas and the lived experience and identity negotiation, respectively. These differing areas of emphasis indicate that religion is analytically porous as well as contextual. However, the dynamics of sacred meaning, identity and community with the social-political force in multi-ethnic societies cannot be fully explained using any of these definitions. Such a gap in concepts requires a deeper integrative

insight. Thus, religion can be described as a socially constructed and historically located system of sanctified meanings, practices, institutions, and moral codes by which individuals and groups of people comprehend ultimate reality, develop a sense of collective identity, and order interpersonal relations in particular cultural and political settings. This definition is a synthesis of the substantive, functional, and experiential aspect, whereas religion is embedded in power, identity, and social cohesion.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion has become one of the leading analytical concepts in the modern social science discourse, especially in the diverse, unequal, and rapidly socio-politically changing society. It is often used when talking about the topics of governance, the building of peace, migration, and development, although its meaning differs in different fields. Social cohesion at its fundamental level is about the nature of relationship between individuals and groups of people, which holds them together in a common social order. According to Chan et al. (2021), social cohesion refers to the level of connectedness and solidarity between groups within the society, which focuses on the trust, shared values, and the desire to cooperate.

Equally, Schiefer and van der Noll (2022) both define it as a multidimensional concept that includes social relations, sense of belonging to the community, and a sense of orientation towards the common good. Under development-oriented scholarship, the Organisation Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2021) defines social cohesion as the ability of a community to promote the welfare of its members, without causing much inequality and marginalisation. Based on comparative data on Europe, Dragolov et al. (2021) define social cohesion as a dynamic social fabric encompassing solid social networks, inclusive institutions, and governance legitimacy. In the perspective of political sociology, Delhey and Boehnke (2021) point out that social cohesion is associated with the horizontal trust of citizens and the vertical trust to the institution. All these points prove that social cohesion is not only related to harmony, or lack of conflict, the process involves enduring interplay, equalism, fairness within the institutions, and commitment to group-specific good.

In spite of these conceptual developments, the literature has shown that there is still some ambiguousness on the relative weight of structural versus relational elements. Whereas Chan et al. (2021) and Schiefer and van der Noll (2022) lay emphasis on interpersonal trust and shared identity, the OECD (2021) and Dragolov et al. (2021) also anticipate institutional inclusion and socio-economic equity. Delhey and Boehnke (2021) fill the gap between these dimensions by combining civic trust and governance legitimacy, but the conflict is between normative and empirical meanings. As an example, are subjective perceptions of belonging the most important measure of social cohesion, or is it objective indicators like inequality and institutional access?

In addition, the current definitions tend to arise within Western liberal settings and are not always able to reflect the realities of the plural, multi-ethnic societies in which identity, religion and historical resentments play a significant role in determining social relationships. This breach demands a situational but integrative expression. Thus, social cohesion can be defined as the dynamic and situation relative process whereby, various individuals and groups can develop mutual trust, shared civic identity, fair participation and institutional legitimacy, thus, maintaining peaceful coexistence and common well being within a particular society. This definition combines the elements of relational, structural, and normative and provides space of dialectic flexibility of culturally specific realities.

Multi-Ethnic Communities

Multi-ethnic communities have become an acute feature of modern societies, as the result of the two-fold impact of migration, post-colonialism, accelerated urbanisation and the world-market

globalisation. The concept of multi-ethnic communities has received a long-lasting flow of academic criticism in the fields of sociology, political science, anthropology, and development studies as nation-states and localities have become increasingly diverse. In general sense, these communities can be defined as those social groups that consist of two or more separate ethnic groups that live in the same territorial, political or social area. Wimmer (2021) defines multi-ethnic community as organised social contexts where ethnic division is still socially significant even though there is interaction in institutional frameworks. Similarly, Fearon (2022) argues that ethnic diversity represents the co-existence of culturally differentiated communities, which are usually divided based on language, ancestry, or historical accounts but share a common polity. Vertovec (2022) in urban studies builds upon this insight by illustrating such multi-ethnic settings as super-diverse spaces where various ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities merge in their daily life. In terms of governance, Laitin (2021) stresses multi-ethnic neighborhoods are the arenas where the state institutions are forced to deal with collective demands of the groups to be represented, recognized, and resources allocated to them. Meanwhile, Chandra (2023) also remarks that ethnicity in these communities is not just demographic difference but a category of identity that is politically significant and, on the one hand, influences mobilisation and collective action. These definitions combined highlight the fact that multi-ethnic communities are not heterogeneous populations as such; they are dynamic spaces where identity, power and social interaction are born out of structural arrangements in common.

Regardless of such contributions, there are conceptual ambiguities that exist in regards to the degree of interaction and integration that the term suggests. Wimmer (2021) emphasizes the importance of boundary-making, whereas Vertovec (2022) predicts the coexistence in urban environments, which are diverse. Fearon (2022) and Laitin (2021) focus on institutional and political aspects, and Chandra (2023) puts emphasis on the strategic and mobilizational dimension of ethnicity. However, these approaches often view multi-ethnic communities either as the aggregations of demographics or as the political formations, without necessarily incorporating relational, cultural and structural processes.

Moreover, most concepts emerge as Western or global comparative, and might not reflect the lived experiences of the post-colonial society in which ethnic identities are woven inextricably into religion, land, and historical resentments. This divider promotes a more integrative and context soul articulation. As a result, multi-ethnic groups can be described as territorial or socially constrained environments where many historically formed ethnic groups co-exist, interact, negotiate identity frames, and share institutions, whilst also negotiating power, cultural specificity and visions through a shared socio-political framework. This definition brings together demographic plurality, boundary processes, institutional arrangements and lived interaction providing a single perspective through which to study diversity in complex societies.

****Theoretical Underpinning****

This paper is grounded on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) which, in turn, had been initially offered by Henri Tajfel in 1972, and polished by him together with John Turner in 1979. SIT describes the way in which human beings find some way of having a sense of self through affiliation to social groups like religion, ethnicity or nationality (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The theory was the extension of the minimal group experiments by Tajfel in the early 1970s that indicated that even arbitrary group difference could produce in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. Its underlying assumptions are three processes in which there are social categorisation (classifying individuals into groups), social identification (taking group membership as a constituent part of a self-concept) and social comparison (comparing oneself with another group to ensure that one

remains in the positive distinctiveness). Such assumptions can be assessed using such indicators as perceived group belonging, intergroup trust, prejudice, and collective bias. The trends of modern research assure the applicability of SIT in explaining identity based mobilisation and intergroup relations in plural societies (Hornsey, 2020; Verkuyten, 2021). SIT is an effective explanatory tool in the Nigerian example, where religion is an effective social marker, since it aids in explaining the interplay of religious affiliation and patterns of solidarity and boundary construction in multi-ethnic communities.

The applicability of the Social Identity Theory to the subject, Influence of Religion on Social Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Communities in Nigeria, is based on the fact that it can help clarify the integrative and heuristic possibilities of religious identity. In Nigeria, religion is not just a personal ideology, it is a strong social category, which organizes communal social identification and political affiliation. Applying the SIT approach, the reason as to why the identification with religious in-groups will create cohesion inside a group, norms and mutual support among members of the group. But intergroup comparison may also become competitive or politicised, and may serve to bolster out-group mistrust and undermine the society at large. Hornsey (2020) states that identity salience tends to rise when it is perceived to be threatened, increasing intergroup differentiation. Similarly, Verkuyten (2021) observes that collective identities determine fairness, inclusion and trust perceptions in a wide variety of societies. The use of SIT in the study allows performing a systematic analysis of the influence of religious categorisation and comparison processes on trust, cooperation and social integration within heterogeneous environments in Nigeria. Accordingly, the Social Identity Theory provides a consistent theoretical basis to study the role of religion in enhancing bonding cohesion within groups on the one hand, and putting restrictions on bridging cohesion across groups in multi-ethnic societies on the other.

****Method****

The research was based on the qualitative approach of the research as a method of thoroughly examining the topic. The secondary sources such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers and government publications and reputable international news outlets were used to get data. These sources gave a wide range of opinions and contextual information pertinent to the research. The materials obtained were systematically reviewed and thoroughly organised in order to be relevant and credible. The data were then analyzed through a thorough content analysis, which entailed the determination of common themes, patterns and underlying meanings. This analysis maximized interpretative richness and made sure that the conclusions were based on the written evidence in a logical manner.

Results and Discussions

Religiosity has an immense effect on how social trust is built, the relationships among groups, and the sense of identity among the multi-ethnic communities in Nigeria. Religion being a fundamental social institution presents society with a set of common belief, code of morality as well as rituals, which governs the behaviour of individuals and organises the collective life. These religious systems promote solidarity, helping one another, and feeling of group responsibility among followers; but can be used to define in-group and out-group lines within various contexts (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). Religious identity and ethnic belonging frequently find each other in Nigeria, where ethnicity and religion are often entangled, and is therefore more socio-politically resonant. In turn, this crossroad determines how people can evaluate reliability, fidelity, and social duty along group boundaries (Allen and Nyiayaana, 2023).

Therefore, the religious affiliation is simultaneously a binding and divisive force.

On the one hand, it encourages collaboration and ethical discipline and a sense of purpose among the communities of faith, which enhances bonding social capital. Conversely, politicised or manipulated religion can create suspicion, prejudice and marginalisation towards the individuals of other religious affiliation. The pluralistic nature of religion in Nigeria creates a complicated social process that can lead either to a better or worse comprehension among groups. Finally, the influence of the religious affiliation on the social trust and the collective identity depends on the overall socio-political context, the discourse of leadership and how diversity in the multi-ethnic societies is managed (Allen and Nyiayaana, 2023).

Influence of Religious Affiliation in Shaping Social Trust, Intergroup Relations, and Perceptions of Collective Identity in Multi-Ethnic Communities in Northern Nigeria

The religious affiliation has a decisive effect on the social trust of the pluralistic societies of Northern Nigeria with Islam being dominant in the Hausa-Fulani, and Christianity and indigenous spirituality dominating the minority populations of southern Kaduna and the Middle Belt. This environment further blends faith and ethnicity, which enhances group identifications and determines the trends of trust and mutual cooperation. The frequent ethno-religious conflicts, with the most famous one being the 2000 Kaduna riots, which have resulted in over 2,000 deaths, only solidified their distrust of religious groups and created residential segregation based on sectarian grounds (Tuki, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that violence exposure enhances aggression towards out-group religions, especially when perceived threats support in-group cohesiveness and increase the salience of religious identity (Tuki, 2024).

As an example, prejudice and discrimination in Jos remains very high even many years after the end of the intercommunal violence, thus undermining the existence of generalized social trust (Scacco & Warren, 2021). Past events like the Maitatsine riots in Kano further instilled fear over forced religious adherence, making a minority group more susceptible (Kouassi et al., 2021). Even though religion is supposed to be a source of solidarity due to common rituals and moral teaching (Ngwoke and Ituma, 2020), the realities of insurgencies, pastoralist-farmer tensions, and politicized religion in Northern Nigeria display the divisive nature of religion. As a result, the level of social trust is weakened, eroded by unsolved ethno-religious conflicts and the lack of interreligious collaboration (Allen and Nyiayaana, 2023).

These lacks in trust are reflected in the intergroup relations in Northern Nigeria. Past injustices, such as the pre-colonial expansion of Islam or the compartmentalization of the colonial administration, reinforced ethnic and religious divides, unalterable even in modern politics (Tuki, 2023; Jawondo et al., n.d.). Recent inter-communal wars in Kaduna and Jos demonstrate how the problem of resource allocation and political competitiveness often takes on a religious aspect, leading to segregation and diminished interaction between the groups (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). The rise of Boko Haram further polarized religion, combining ethnicity and radicalism and making populations of the Muslim-majority states of the North and the Christian populations in the South more suspicious of each other (Onakuse & Jatula, 2021).

Political elites often use religious identities to elect or gain economically, continuing host relations (Lenshie, 2020). Even inclusion-built mechanisms, including federal character principle, sometimes strengthen clientelism and resentment (Jawondo et al., n.d.). However, this does not always divide people through religion. In cities, like Kano, religious figures sometimes use sermons and mediation forums and informal power to alleviate the violence and restore trust (Willemse & Bergh, 2016).

Religion through Mosques and churches can be used to engage in dialogue, and resolve disputes, hence, a good example of the integrative ability of religion when handled responsibly.

Religious affiliation is another important factor that significantly affects the collective identity perceptions in Northern Nigeria. The prevailing scripts often explain belonging through the religious prism, creating the sense of us versus them, and complicating the process of national integration (Lenshie, 2020). The frequent violence in Jos and other places has strengthened in-group cohesiveness and undermined the connection to a larger national identity (Tuki, 2024). Symbolic controversies, including the perception of religious bias in the national spaces, have only fueled the sense of exclusion (Kouassi et al., 2021). Countervailing dynamics are however present. The consensus and support can be facilitated by religious social capital, especially through common activities and community-based network (Salman, 2024). Inter-faith interaction programs (such as shared places of worship and formal dialogue forums) have recorded quantifiable enhanced cross-group awareness (Ogunbiyi et al., 2023; Ngwoke and Akabike, 2022).

Nevertheless, the collective identity remains disintegrated by structural factors, which include state formation, sub-ethnic rivalry, and colonialism (Jawondo et al., n.d.). As a whole, even though religion provides moral resources that can be used to build solidarity, the historical struggles in Northern Nigeria and the politicization of identities have often resulted in the deviation of religious affiliation towards exclusion instead of integration, which enforces the need to establish an inclusive government and continuous inter-faith interaction (Allen and Nyiayaana, 2023).

Religious Affiliation in Shaping Social Trust, Intergroup Relations, and Perceptions of Collective Identity in Multi-Ethnic Communities in Southern Nigeria

Such an impact as religious affiliation plays a central role in the formation of social trust in a multi-ethnic context of Southern Nigeria. Christianity is predominant in the Igbo communities of the South East and the Ijaw of the South South whereas Yorubaland in the South West is an illustration of complex merging of Christianity and Islam with religious practices of the communities. In many Yoruba and Igbo traditional localities sacred groves of the traditional deities play not only spiritual roles but also as local peace-infrastructure processes that protect biodiversity and contests by means of common cosmological standards. These sacred places foster a trust in the community and in most cases, they are effective in maintaining environmental and social peace than even the official state structures (Benjamin, n.d.).

Likewise, churches and mosques are the seat of considerable moral authority in Ado-Ekiti and other South-Western towns, enabling them to take the role of custodians of social and ecological order in case inclusiveness takes the precedence (Benjamin, n.d.). Other examples of the use of religious social capital in enhancing interpersonal trust and responsibility include faith-based initiatives including church-led environmental campaigns in Lagos. However, curbing greater cohesion can be done through exclusionary practices, which include limiting access to religious facilities. This is the reason why externally imposed ecological restoration programmes by oil corporations did not succeed in rebuilding trust in the Niger Delta since they excluded the people when compared to community-owned forestry projects in Ekiti and Ondo (Benjamin, n.d.). Despite the fact that, when political contests are being run by the elite, which manipulates the concept of religiosity, this can destroy the generalized trust (Salman, 2024), Southern Nigeria generally displays higher everyday interfaith engagement levels than the conflict-prone regions in the North especially in shared market places and in civic spaces.

Intergroup relations in the urban centres of Southern Nigeria including Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu are indicative of co-operation and coexistence in the country as well as the tension between the religions and ethnic groups. The South-Western clan of the Yoruba is quite common in terms of Muslim-Christian coexistence, which is maintained as a result of religious leaders who utilize sermons and mediation platforms to reconcile any conflicts, and the mosques/churches became the subject of dialogue (BENJAMIN, n.d.). However, the party politics and economic resource competition may be mobilized on the basis of religion. Resource-related militancy, in the South-South, combines ethnic grumblings with Christian identity among ethnic groups, like the Ijaw, at times putting relationships with other groups in a difficult position (Williams, 2023). Similarly, separatist movements in the South-East, especially those like the Internet Protocol Biafra (IPOB), have the tendency to articulate the narrative of marginalisation in religious-cultural identity, which strengthens separations yet federal power-sharing processes are meant to promote inclusion (Jawondo et al., n.d.). In this context, interfaith forums and programs sponsored by national organizations have aimed at curing the stereotypes and enhancing peaceful coexistence (Williams, 2023). Empirical studies show that well-organized interfaith encounters do decrease prejudice and increase cooperation particularly in mixed city markets wherein economic interdependence fosters cooperation (Ngwoke & Akabike, 2022). Though cities such as Lagos might be segregated in an urban context, Southern Nigeria in general can exhibit an overall tendency where religion is used as a reflection of boundary and a connector depending on how leaders are, how inclusive it is, and the socio-political environment.

Religious belonging is a factor that influences the understanding of shared identity in the plural world of Southern Nigeria. The South-West has a mixed Muslim-Christian population that leads to hybrid identities where local practices are mixed with Abrahamic rules, which enlarge the social networks and cement the coexistence (Salman, 2024). Christianity in the South-East is still the focus of identity consolidation after the civil war but the discourse on marginalisation and separatist movements might fuel back exclusive sentiments (Jawondo et al., n.d.). Southern Christian fears of secularism are sometimes brought about by national symbolic controversies, such as attitudes towards religious bias in government structures (Kouassi et al., 2021). However, religious social capital, in terms of common practices, charity organizations, and inter-religious interaction, still has avenues of inclusive identity formation (Ngwoke & Akabike, 2022). The religious organisations tend to use the doctrinal teachings that are against violence to resist the polarisation brought about by the elites (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). Although structural aspects like the creation of states and competition of resources may disintegrate sub-ethnic identity along the sub-ethnic boundaries (Jawondo et al., n.d.), the relatively tolerant intermingling of Southern Nigeria shows that religion can both foster moral solidarity and allow diversity. The issue still goes on how to make religious identity strengthen inclusive belonging and not exclusive nationalism especially under economic pressure and political rivalry.

Relationship between ethno-religious identity politics, urban settlement patterns, and social cohesion in Nigeria.

This section delves into how the interplay of ethnic and religious identities with urban spatial dynamics influences the degree of social cohesion in Nigerian cities, particularly examining the impact of demographic concentrations and political mobilization on intergroup relations. It scrutinizes how distinct ethno-religious groups, often concentrated in specific urban areas, leverage their collective identities for political ends, thereby affecting the broader societal fabric.

Relationship between ethno-religious identity politics, urban settlement patterns, and social cohesion in Northern Nigeria.

The large cities of Northern Nigeria Jos, Kaduna, and Kano are good examples of how ethno-religious identity politics determines settlement patterns, and by implication, social cohesion. The indirect rule established Hausa-Fulani Muslim pre-eminence in the North and solidified ethnic hierarchies that were enhanced by post-independence wars (Jawondo et al., n.d.). The tensions between predominantly Christian Berom and Anaguta communities and Muslim Hausa-Fulani communities over the status of indigenous population in the city of Jos have led to repeated violence incidents, especially after the 2001 crisis that resulted in the deaths of thousands of people by 2010 (Madueke, 2019; Nnabuihe and Onwuzuruigbo, 2019). These conflicts led to spatial discontinuity as people retreated to ethnically pure enclaves to find safety. The mixed neighbourhoods became unstable frontier zones in further confrontations, in 2008 when crowds of segregated strongholds attacked neighbourhoods (Madueke, 2018). The same dynamic was observed in Kaduna, following the 2000 riots driven by the discussions about the implementation of Sharia that intensified the segregation between Christians and Muslims and limited the interactions between the two groups (Scacco & Warren, 2018, 2021). In Kano, urban space became politicised by episodes of Maitatsine rebellions and subsequent riots that pushed the minority of migrants to Christianity to the periphery, and strengthened the formation of religious clusters (Ehrhardt, 2016; Kouassi et al., '2021). The settlement patterns that result of it restrict the engagement of groups on a daily basis, intensify indifference, and corrosion of shared urban identity, where politicians continuously use indigeneity and religion as tools to secure electoral and economic advantage (Jawondo et al., n.d.; Uzochukwu et al., n.d.).

In this way, the urban settlement processes of Northern Nigerian cities can be seen as a cyclic process of interaction of demographic concentration and identity politics. Disputes over land, representation and access to services have been increased by post-colonial migration, intense urbanisation as well as economic competition. In Jos, the Yan Shanu (majority Muslim) and Nasarawa Gwong (majority Christian) areas have become symbolic ethnic enclaves, undermining cross-communal affiliations and transforming city politics into a zero-sum game (Madueke, 2019). The post-riot residential segregation in Kaduna reflects the processes related to the division of societies in the real world, where the fear of being segregated restricts the movement between the groups, and parallel social structures are consolidated (Scacco and Warren, 2021). The presence of farmer-herd conflicts in peri-urban settings where the Fulani Muslim pastoralists and the Christian agrarian communities dominate further displaces people, as they support the formation of exclusionary settlement patterns (Jawondo et al., n.d.). Spatial isolation reinforces in-group solidarity and reduces bridging trust, which provides a good environment to recruit extremists and manipulate politics (Tuki, 2024). Informal zoning on ethno-religious lines is always expressed in shared urban space markets, schools, transportation centers, limiting economic interdependence, and undermining community civic identity (Uzochukwu et al., 2020).

The cityscapes of the north still have openings to unification despite deep-rooted division. It is shown that prejudice can be minimized and trust restored in the post-conflict societies through inclusive urban planning, equal distribution of services, and mixed educational or vocational programmes (Scacco and Warren, 2018; Nnabuihe and Onwuzuruigbo, 2019). The examples of inter-faith dialogue in Kano and Kaduna show that the crisis framing by religious leaders will either stimulate mobilisation or restraint (Ehrhardt, 2016). Nonetheless, identity politics tend to override integrative actions, especially in situations where federal settlements and zoning systems are seen as firming clientelism instead of equality (Jawondo et al., n.d.). Lack of resilience in segregated urban peripheries is further enhanced by the fact that insurgency, and banditry persisted as a result

of exclusionary settlement patterns. However, according to the empirical research, cooperation and the rejection of polarisation based on elite influence can be achieved with the help of structured intergroup contact, particularly in the economic and civic context (Ngwoke & Akabike, 2022). Finally, the conjunction of ethno-religious identity politics and urban settlement in Northern Nigeria indicates a trend whereby spatial segregation is a manifestation and source of political fragmentation, and which raises significant barriers to sustainable social cohesion.

The key urban centres in Southern Nigeria such as Lagos, Ibadan, PortHarcourt and Enugu also reflect on how ethno-religious identity politics are affected by the patterns of settlement and also determine social cohesion. The identity politics in the southern are mostly based on ethnicity and indigeneity instead of on doctrinal differences although they are mainly Christian. The Western Region was treated to colonial indirect rule, which strengthened ethnic hierarchy that escalated during post-independence migration of Igbo and Hausa-Fulani traders to southern cities (Jawondo et al., n.d.). The indigeneity clauses in Lagos codify the differences between settlers and indigenes to create structural distinctions that drive disputes on political representation, possession of land, and access to resources (Adenuga, 2022). Frequent violent conflicts, including those of 2003 and 2019 between Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa communities, led to expulsions and the concentration of ethnic enclaves in such regions as Mushin and Somolu, where the level of intergroup interaction decreased (Okunola, 2012). Empirical data indicate that minorities usually demonstrate less confidence in local authorities, especially in situations when the clientelism politics focuses on the beneficiaries of the dominant ethnicity (LeBas, 2020). Political elites often use indigeneity discourses when making a campaign, which strengthens exclusionary zoning agreements (Jawondo et al., n.d.). As a result, residential clustering and politics based on identity undermine civil identity, whereas research connects urban diversity (when unchecked) to out-group stereotyping and decreased out-group trust in adolescents (Demarest and Langer, 2025; Roberts, 2025).

The patterns of urban settlements in the southern parts of Nigeria also indicate how the concentration of migrants interacts with the ethnic and religious identities to form cohesion. The booming growth of the post-colonial Lagos gave rise to the overcrowded areas like Ajegunle where the Yoruba natives, Igbo migrants and Nigerian minorities live in economic exploitation. In the 1990s militias like the Odua People's Congress attacked so-called settlers, putting land issues in an ethnic context and increasing spatial polarisation (Okunola, 2012). Neighbourhoods became symbolic strongholds - Isale Eko and Idumota - and bringing down cross-group connections (Lebas, 2020). In Ibadan, ethnically clustering migration patterns are promoted by the kinship, whereas economic interdependence tends to be relatively stable, preventing the escalation of violence (Kofi, 2022). The urbanisation based on oil caused competition between the Ijaw militants and other ethnic groups, and the conflicts over resources mixed with religious overtones in the mainly Christian areas (Benjamin, n.d.). Farmer-herder conflicts in Enugu and beyond with the involvement of the Fulani Muslim groups helped to strengthen periphery segregation and increase the attitude of exclusion (Jawondo et al., n.d.). It has been continually shown that territorial seclusion enhances the solidarity of in-group and destroys the trust of out-groups, which forms an opportune environment to mobilise secessionists or militants (Tuki, 2024). The principles of federal character that are meant to enhance equity tend to reinforce the patronage networks that disintegrate instead of uniting the urban constituencies (Jawondo et al., n.d.).

However, with these structural strains, southern cityscapes have chances at reinforcing the cohesion by inclusive governance and intentional intergroup interaction. In Lagos, the mixed public and green facilities can help in interaction among people of different ethnic and religious affiliations and the perceptions towards safety and social trust can be improved when the access to it is fairly distributed

(Benjamin, n.d.). The relatively peaceful inter-ethnic situation in Ibadan is a demonstration of how economic integration and residential investments can overcome segregation (Kofi, 2022). Urban renewal projects have been active in Port Sahara and the city officials highlight the need to engage the local communities in the development of a city road network to avoid the displacement grievances that may trigger a recurrence of identity based strains (Benjamin, n.d.). Religious doctrines of tolerance are used by inter-faith and inter-cultural programs in Enugu and other cities to reduce the problem of farmers and herders disputes (Jawondo et al., n.d.). Empirical evidence illustrating the effect of cross-ethnic friendships and organized interaction is that prejudice and social distance are alleviated, which in turn curbs the ill effect of diversity (Demarest and Langer, 2025; Ngwoke and Akabike, 2022). Whereas indigeneity laws and elites-led zoning plans institutionalise exclusion (Adenuga, n.d.; Jawondo et al., n.d.), interregional integration is encouraged by the policymaking of the National Youth Service Corps (Chinen et al., n.d.). Altogether, the fair urbanization, equal representation, and long-term inter-group contact are still of primary significance and can help to alleviate identity politics and promote the lasting social cohesion in southern Nigeria.

Roles of religious institutions and actors in either fostering intergroup harmony or contributing to divisions within Nigeria's plural society

Religious organizations and actors in Nigeria are placed in a paradoxical situation in the plural society of the Nigerian society by acting as both division agents and peace brokers. On the one hand, past and current events show how the mobilisation of religions has increased the cleavages in the society. An example of such radical religious uprisings that may be violent to embrace pluralism is the Maitatsine uprising of 1980 in Kano, which ended in mass fatalities and doubt over long-term mistrust that affected the lives of faith communities (Kouassi et al., 2021). Even symbolic controversies, including the views of Muslim imbalances in the representation of Abuja as a federal capital neutral, have increased suspicion and strengthened the accounts of exclusion (Kouassi et al., 2021). The Christian-Muslim conflict was aggravated by the fact that the adoption of Sharia law in some of the northern states since 2000 was instrumentalised by political forces that needed to consolidate support by using religious identity hence the cycles of violence (Chitando et al., 2020; Olawale, 2020). Sermons, open statements, and policy statements in such situations made religious identity a political instrument, which created an us and them dichotomy and lead to the loss of social trust in multi-faith cities.

Along with open conflict, religious actors occasionally perpetuate the divisions indirectly based on following partisan interests or exclusivist discourse. The case of insurgency led by Boko Haram shows that the extremist reconstruction of faith can flourish in the conditions of segregation and a lack of trust between various groups, displacing communities and strengthening bias regardless of the anti-violence postulates of mainstream religion (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). Segregation of cities like Kaduna after the conflicts has restricted meaningful interfaith interaction and therefore allowed the continuation of stereotypes and in some cases enabled the mobilisation of the followers through inflammatory preaching (Scacco and Warren, 2018). Electoral politics also demonstrate that religious affiliations can be mobilised in a strategic way that influences voters and polarises them (Chigbu et al., 2024; Igboin, 2023). In Southern cities, the displaced, northern Muslims are occasionally stigmatised against by their religion, promoting the formation of an enclave at the expense of strengthening the overall unity (Roberts, 2025). Such polarisation is empirically associated with less outgroup trust, especially in highly diverse cities, especially among young people (Demarest and Langer, 2025). These trends can reveal how religious institutions, once combined with clientelism and identity politics, can weaken secular politics and national assimilation.

On the other hand, religious organizations have the great potential to develop intergroup harmony in case inclusive leadership and dialogue are followed. The Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, which

was founded by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammed Ashafa in the year 1995, is a good example of grassroots reconciliation efforts that have worked in ensuring non-violence and understanding in Kaduna (Chitando et al., 2020). The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council has also enabled institutional Christian-Muslim interaction after the times of crisis are over (Religion and the Making of Nigeria, 2016).

Conciliatory religious framing in Kano was effective in the 2006 protests to avoid further intensification, which showed that there was moderate effect of responsible leadership (Ehrhardt, 2016). Religions in all traditions preach peace, justice, and unity among people, which corresponds to the sociological views that see religion as a powerful source of moral unity (Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). Empirical evidence has verified that structured interfaith contact, i.e., mixed vocational programmes and community-based programmes, decreases prejudice and enhances cooperation (Scacco and Warren, 2018; Ngwoke and Akabike, 2022). Therefore, as much as religious organisations can institutionalise division in case of politicisation, they also provide the potential change to reconciliation, trust and sustainable social integration in the diverse Nigerian society.

Conclusion

The paper has investigated how religion affects social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies in Nigeria and established that religious affiliation has been a dual and far-reaching consequential determinant on the development of social trust, intergroup relations, and collective identity in both Northern and Southern parts. This discovery showed that in Northern Nigeria, ethno-religious identity politics had played a major role in determining the urban settlement pattern that led to residential segregation, the development of enclaves and the repetitive impact of the mistrust cycle. Urban centers with a high population density like Jos, Kaduna, and Kano had suffered spatial disintegration due to the violent conflicts and created cohesive groups within the groups and undermined social capital across groups. In Southern Nigeria, despite the tendency of religious pluralism to coexist with relative tolerance, indigene-settler politics, ethnic mobilisation and selective exclusion also had weakened inclusive urbanisation. In both areas, the political elite had often used religious identities to pursue electoral and economic benefits and consequently increased divisions, undermined the generalised trust.

The research also determined that the religious institutions and actors had operated in a two-sided manner in the plural society of Nigeria. Inflammatory rhetoric, symbolic exclusions, and reinforcement of politicised religious policies on the one hand had helped to lead to polarisation and undermine the process of national integration. Conversely, organized interfaith dialogue, local interfaith mediation programs, and inclusive religious leadership had shown some quantitative ability to lessen bigotry and instill reconciliation. Observational studies revealed that in the areas where intergroup contact was promoted, voluntarily, by vocational programmes, joint civic space and peace forums, prejudice and mistrust decreased and trust increased. On the contrary, in the areas where segregation and identity-based mobilisation were still dominant, the hostility and suspicion increased.

Based on the Social Identity Theory, the research explained the dynamics with references to social categorisation, identification and comparison processes. It established that religious identity had emerged as an important social category in terms of which individuals established belonging and difference. When people felt threatened or politically competitive, in-group favouritism, and out-group distrust had been amplified and this limited the extent of social cohesion. Nonetheless, in areas where inclusive leadership and cross-cutting interactions led to fewer strict boundary differentials, the same had led to solidarity and collaborative interaction of religious identity.

In general, the authors of the research found that religion in Nigeria had not been necessarily divisive or necessarily integrative, instead, its influence on the social cohesion had been contingent

on both contextual governance and the spatial organisation as well as identity politics management. Sustainable cohesion thus meant the need to have inclusive institutional designs, fair urban designs, and intentional interreligious involvement that was able to reconfigure identity lines into forums of collective civic belonging.

Recommendations

Based on the major findings above, the following recommendations were stated:

- 1) Spread Policies of Inclusive Urban Planning and Desegregation: Federal and state governments ought to introduce inclusive urban planning policies that will not encourage residential isolation based on ethno-religious ground. Mixed housing, even distribution of services and common community facilities like schools, markets and leisure centres should be encouraged so as to add more intergroup contacts on daily basis. Participatory governance should be included in urban renewal efforts to promote the inclusion of the minority. Boundary reinforcement would be decoupled, in-group exclusivity undermined, and bridging social capital would be enhanced to be able to maintain sustainable social cohesion.
- 2) Organise Organised Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Education: Religious organisations ought to institutionalize long term interreligious dialogue forums on the community and state level with government and civil society alliances. The programmes on peace education to the youth, religious leaders, and people with influence in the society ought to focus on tolerance, civic identity, and conflict-resolving skills. Projects and vocational activities that are mixed in terms of religion need to be increased, so that meaningful contact can be developed. Such frequent cooperation would decrease biases, neutralize extremist discourses, and make religious identity a source of cooperation and not division.
- 3) Enhance Governance Reforms to curb Identity Based political manipulation: Policymakers and election bodies ought to institute laws that prevent politicisation of religious and ethnic identities in the course of campaigns. Clientelist practices that strengthen indigene-settler divides should be substituted by open allocation of resources, appointment based on merit, and accountability. The national identity must be fostered by civic education through superiority of nationality over sectarian sentiments whereas constitutional provisions of secularism must be maintained both symbolically and practically. Limiting elite manipulation of the religious feeling would reduce polarisation, and develop conditions of trust-building among the multi-ethnic communities of Nigeria.

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