PLASU Journal of Religion, Culture and Humanities
Vol: 2 No. 2. July, 2026

CULTURE, RELIGION, AND HUMANITY: DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL INTERACTION, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL PLURALISM IN AFRICA WITH A FOCUS ON NIGERIA

REV. MATHIAS POLYCARP WAPLE
Affiliation: The Lord‟s Presence Global Company. Albarka Organic Fertiizer Initiative, Rayfield–Jos South, Plateau State, Nigeria

Abstract
This article examines the complex interplay among cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and political competition in Africa, centering on Nigeria as a critical, paradigmatic case study. It investigates how indigenous cultural practices, creative arts, and institutionalized religious systems actively shape contemporary social and economic life. Furthermore, this study elucidates the distinct mechanisms through which concurrent religious and political pluralism simultaneously challenge and enable state governance frameworks. Particular analytical focus is directed toward the critical deployment of interfaith dialogue and state-level cultural policies designed to mitigate ethno-religious polarization and promote structural peaceful coexistence. By synthesizing recent empirical studies, contemporary socio-political data, and relevant policy literature, the paper explores the deep-seated historical trajectories from colonial administrative restructurings to postcolonial state-building crises that have transformed complementary cultural systems into fragmented tools for elite mobilization. Beyond analyzing these systematic vulnerabilities, the paper illuminates the socioeconomic dimensions of pluralism, highlighting how cultural heritage industries and faith-based developmental initiatives serve as vital engines for local entrepreneurship, community resilience, and cross-group networks. Ultimately, this study applies a dual theoretical framework of intersectional pluralism and social capital theory to evaluate how overlapping identities can transition from structural fault lines into cooperative resources. The article concludes by proposing actionable, scalable pathways for inclusive cultural governance, comprehensive institutional reform, and locally driven peacebuilding architectures capable of transforming identity diversity into a sustainable asset for sub-Saharan socio-political stability, structural development, and long-term economic prosperity across the African continent.

Keywords: Culture, Humanity, Political Pluralism, Religion, Nigeria, Africa

Introduction
Africa‟s contemporary societal fabric is intricately interwoven with dense threads of linguistic diversity, ethnic plurality, and profound spiritual depth. Nigeria, frequently and aptly termed "miniature Africa," embodies these macro-continental dynamics within its borders, hosting over 250 distinct ethnic groups and a multitude of deeply entrenched religious traditions (Falola 12). While such comprehensive diversity enriches regional identity, fosters artistic innovation, and generates rich social tapestries, it simultaneously introduces severe structural vulnerabilities that can fuel violent conflict when institutional management is weak or exclusionary.

The historical trajectories of colonial and postcolonial state-building in Africa severely complicated the organic, historically complementary harmony that previously characterized indigenous cultural and religious systems. European colonial cartography and administrative strategies transformed fluid ethnic borders into rigid political divisions, frequently setting the stage for contemporary identity-based friction. In the postcolonial era, sub-Saharan societies have increasingly been defined by dense webs of cultural differentiation and overlapping religious allegiances. In the majority of modern African states, these lines of difference are intensely politicized, serving as ready mechanisms for both elite-driven conflict mobilization and grassroots cooperation.

Nigeria characterized by intense ethno-linguistic heterogeneity, rapid population growth, and a sharp demographic balance between substantial Christian and Muslim populations presents a crucial case for analysing how religion and culture intersect with institutional politics, macroeconomics, and everyday communal survival. Consequently, a systematic understanding of the structural relationships operating among culture, religion, and politics is vital. Disentangling these dynamics provides essential empirical pathways toward achieving institutional justice, sustainable peace, and holistic human development within pluralistic societies.

Literature Review

Contemporary scholarship tracking African pluralism regularly converges on two periodic, intersecting patterns. Principally, researchers establish that extensive cultural diversity yields a dualistic reality: it simultaneously builds robust adaptive capacities providing plural resources for communal creativity, informal economic markets, and alternative governance structures and creates deep social fault lines when formal state institutions fail to manage pluralism equitably (Omotosho 45). When public administration is fragile or compromised by nepotism, identity differences rapidly transform from cultural assets into drivers of civil friction.

Secondarily, academic literature underscores that religion in Nigeria is deeply embedded within the matrix of formal and informal political life. Far from operating purely within the private sphere, religious institutions and clerical leaders exert monumental influence over public administration, electoral mobilization, political clientelism, and macro-social policy (Njoku 112). This integration allows religious identity to dictate voting blocks and policy priorities. Recent empirical investigations have increasingly documented how direct exposure to inter-ethnic and inter-faith diversity shapes psychological development, demonstrating that urban diversity fundamentally molds adolescents‟ social trust and intergroup attitudes in metropolitan Nigeria (Demarest 89). These findings underscore that tolerance is not passive but is actively forged through the quality of daily localized social dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes the dynamics of sub-Saharan pluralism by integrating two complementary theoretical frameworks: Intersectional Pluralism and Social Capital Theory.

- **Intersectional Pluralism** posits that human identities specifically ethnicity, theological faith, and socio-cultural status do not operate as isolated, parallel variables. Instead,

they are overlapping, mutually constitutive categories. In Nigeria, an individual's political behavior cannot be understood by looking at ethnicity alone; rather, it is the intersection of being, for instance, Christian and Yoruba, or Muslim and Hausa, that determines their interaction with the state structures.

- **Social Capital Theory** provides the analytical tools required to determine *when* and *why* intergroup networks produce positive socio-economic outcomes. It distinguishes between bonding social capital (hyper-insular, inward-looking ties that reinforce exclusive group loyalty and fuel out-group hostility) and bridging social capital (cross-cutting networks that build robust trust, inter-communal economic collaboration, and structural political stability).

Culture and Economic Life

Socio-cultural practices, creative arts, and historical heritage are far more than static identity markers; they function as vital drivers of macroeconomic activity and micro-entrepreneurship. The performing arts, traditional festivals, and craft economies form the bedrock of regional tourism, extensive informal financial markets, and local entrepreneurial ecosystems. When these cultural heritage industries are intentionally integrated into formal public policy and urban planning, they systematically contribute to community resilience, alleviate poverty, and foster sustainable cross-group interactions.

Conversely, when the state ignores or marginalizes these sectors, civic spaces shrink, economic disenfranchisement deepens, and ethno-regional grievances amplify. Empirical studies focusing on regional Nigerian economies confirm that strategic cultural economy initiatives and structured interfaith cultural events significantly strengthen local livelihoods while building durable cross-community ties that insulate communities against political shocks.

Religion, Politics, and Governance

Within the modern Nigerian polity, religious conviction intersects with state political culture in highly volatile ways. Religious leaders routinely operate as central actors in electoral mobilization, civic resistance, and moral adjudication, while religious doctrine heavily informs public expectations of state accountability and justice. While religious pluralism possesses immense integrative potential for grassroots community development and democratic consolidation, the systematic politicization of faith by desperate political elites routinely intensifies social exclusion and structural instability. Policy scholars warn that when weakly institutionalized, supposedly secular governance frameworks are paired with deep-seated, identity-based clientelism, the risk of explosive intergroup tension escalates exponentially.

Interfaith Tolerance and Peacebuilding

Empirical literature focused on West African peace architectures indicates that locally led reconciliation programs, structured interfaith dialogue platforms, and religious-led peace initiatives can dramatically reduce ideological polarization and support grassroots infrastructural development. International and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

have frequently financed localized interfaith peacebuilding models across northern and central Nigeria.

However, critical assessments of these donor-led interventions reveal a recurring flaw: many programs suffer from poor localization, relying on top-down Western conflict-resolution paradigms while showing insufficient deference to highly effective indigenous mediatory practices and traditional elders.

NIGERIA: CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS

i. Traditional Foundations of African Distinctiveness

The reach of African culture extends far beyond superficial aesthetic expression; it operates as an active, living philosophy that dictates communal ethics and social accountability. As John Mbiti famously observed, "Africans are notoriously religious," meaning that spiritual awareness is deeply implanted in every facet of human culture from birth, through adulthood, to death (Mbiti 1).

In contemporary Nigeria, prominent socio-cultural blocks such as the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo continuously manifest these foundational worldview principles through their historical festivals, complex musical traditions, and resilient systems of traditional governance. Within these frameworks, structural respect for elders, radical hospitality, communal responsibility, and collective safety remain non-negotiable moral codes (Falola 33).

Nevertheless, rapid Westernization, predatory urban capitalization, and unregulated globalization heavily threaten these traditional value systems. This creates severe psychological and structural tensions between indigenous generational wisdom and imported, hyper-individualistic ideologies. To counteract this destabilization, local cultural forms and evolving religious institutions must engage in deep dialogue to sustain moral equilibrium and communal cohesion.

ii. Religious Pluralism and Transformative Inspiration

Nigeria‟s dynamic religious landscape dominated by Islam, Christianity, and the enduring undercurrents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) powerfully illustrates the double-edged nature of intense spiritual pluralism. On one hand, religion serves as an indispensable moral compass, an emotional anchor, and a provider of vital social welfare infrastructure. On the other hand, it is frequently co-opted as a highly effective weapon for political warfare.

The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) has continually asserted that proactive, institutionalized dialogue, rather than aggressive theological dominance, is the only viable pathway to long-term social peace ("Interfaith Peacebuilding" 5). The empirical reality is clear: whenever religious organizing aligns itself with structural compassion, poverty alleviation, and human rights, it rapidly fortifies community life. Conversely, when faith identities are instrumentalised by political elites to secure regional votes, it breeds deep societal mistrust and corrodes national unity.

iii. Ethno-Religious Geography

Nigeria‟s geographical architecture features deep socio-political fault lines that frequently overlap with regional religious majorities. The northern territories maintain a heavy Muslim majority, while the southern regions are characterized by dense Christian majorities.

However, this broad binary obscures a highly nuanced reality. The central "Middle Belt" and various metropolitan centers are incredibly mixed, featuring pluralistic religious, linguistic, and ethnic compositions living in close spatial proximity. This spatial intermixing creates complex arenas where minor local disputes over land or political appointments can instantly trigger broader ethno-religious confrontations.

iv. Policy Responses and Local Initiatives

In response to these geographic vulnerabilities, indigenous interfaith councils, joint cross-cultural festivals, and innovative educational curricula emphasizing shared civic values have shown immense promise in neutralizing regional radicalization.

Despite these localized successes, transforming these initiatives into scalable state policy remains difficult. Effective scaling requires absolute transparency in public resource allocation, the systematic strengthening of secular civic institutions, and the deliberate inclusion of minority cultural and linguistic practices within formal state governance structures. Peer-reviewed research confirms that religious and cultural plurality can be harnessed as an engine for macro-development, provided that state leadership remains transparent, responsive, and institutionally accountable.

v. Conflict Drivers

The modern drivers of violent conflict within the Nigerian state are multi-layered and structurally interconnected:

- **Youth Marginalization:** Severe economic disenfranchisement and systemic unemployment leave vast populations of young people highly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups and criminal networks.
- **Resource Competition:** Desertification in the far north, combined with changing demographic patterns, has intensified brutal zero-sum competition over arable land and water access between migratory herders and sedentary farming communities.
- **Identity Politics:** Political elites intentionally weaponize ethnicity and theological doctrine to mobilize voter bases, mask administrative failures, and shield themselves from corruption charges.
- **Outgroup Hostility:** Empirical data demonstrates that prolonged exposure to violent conflict naturally heightens psychological outgroup hostility, creating a vicious cycle of preemptive strikes and bloody reprisal maneuvers (Tuki 74).

vi. The Intersection of Politics, Religion, and Colonial Legacies

The complex intersection of contemporary politics and religion in West Africa reflects both damaging colonial inheritances and postcolonial administrative failures. During the colonial era, British indirect rule deliberately institutionalized administrative divisions, restricted natural cross-cultural assimilation, and created highly uneven regional access to Western education and centralized economic power (Ehusani 88).

Postcolonial Nigeria directly inherited these fractured institutional structures. Successive political classes quickly realized that exploiting latent religious anxieties was the cheapest, most effective way to consolidate personal wealth and regional political influence.

To break this cycle, the state must re-envision culture and religion as primary apparatuses for ethics, societal reconciliation, and structural equity. As Chinua Achebe famously and succinctly summarized, "the problem with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (Achebe 1). Resolving this failure requires the intentional cultivation of a leadership class whose governance methodologies are deeply rooted in cultural morality, social justice, and spiritual responsibility to the collective public good.

DIALOGUE AND STRATEGIC PATHWAYS

The contemporary Nigerian experience offers several critical, actionable insights that are directly transferable to pluralistic states across the wider African continent:

Institutional Administration Matters

Cultural and religious diversity yields net-positive societal outcomes only where formal state institutions deliberately, transparently manage pluralism. This requires the equitable distribution of national resources, universal access to unbiased civic education, and the implementation of radically inclusive policy-making processes. Left unmanaged by the state, diversity naturally defaults to a tool for fractional conflict; strictly managed via institutional equity, it becomes a foundation for state stability.

Cultural Policy as Development Policy

State support for the creative arts and traditional festivals must not be treated as secondary, decorative budgeting. Recognizing and financing cultural industries, protecting intellectual property rights for local artisans, and incorporating comprehensive cultural history into public school curricula actively generates robust social capital and opens vital alternative economic pathways. By building local economic security, states can systematically eliminate the desperate financial conditions that allow radical identity politics to take root.

Indigenous Ownership in Peacebuilding

Top-down, Western-centric peace interventions routinely collapse because they fail to understand local relational networks. Conflict mediation and interfaith dialogue programs achieve long-term success only when they are completely owned by local communities,

contextually grounded in indigenous realities, and structurally integrated with traditional conflict-resolution practices and trusted tribal elders.

Cultural and Religious Pluralism as Pathways to Peaceful Coexistence

Durable peace within a highly pluralistic society depends entirely on the absolute verification of justice, structural inclusivity, and the promotion of shared civic values. Deep cultural and religious diversity must be re-framed by public leadership as a profound civil asset rather than a permanent national security threat.

Policies that incentivize cross-faith economic ventures, intercultural educational exchanges, and uncompromising social justice are vital. This approach aligns directly with traditional African spirituality, which views the community as the literal heart of human existence. As John Mbiti famously articulated, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 108). This foundational philosophy provides the exact moral and psychological framework required to build modern national unity and peaceful coexistence out of fragmented identities.

Interfaith Tolerance and Cultural Collaboration

The coexistence of diverse religious and cultural practices in West Africa provides rich opportunities for grassroots interfaith cooperation. Across countless Nigerian communities, interfaith marriages, multi-ethnic markets, and shared secular festivals serve as living proof of peaceful daily cohabitation.

Furthermore, cultural diplomacy executed through the intentional promotion of literature, fine arts, cinema, and music bridges deep regional divisions far more effectively than political deal-making. Financing interfaith education and grassroots peace programs specifically targeting vulnerable youth populations builds psychological resilience against radicalism. Mutual respect and structural dialogue continuously foster what George Ehusani terms *"Ozovehe"* the deep philosophical affirmation of life and shared, sacred humanity above all lines of difference (Ehusani 32).

Socioeconomic Dimensions of Pluralism

Religion and culture actively dictate the trajectory of Nigeria‟s macroeconomic and microeconomic development. Faith-based institutions have historically served as the primary, most reliable providers of healthcare, modern education, and emergency humanitarian aid across marginalized regions starved of state presence (Falola 57). Similarly, traditional cultural festivals and heritage tourism function as powerful engines for local economic empowerment, small-business capitalization, and historic preservation.

Conversely, the unchecked rise of religious extremism, widening social inequality, and cultural hostility severely disrupt macro-development, driving away foreign investment and destroying local infrastructure. Therefore, modern development strategies must deliberately harness religious and cultural capital. This can be achieved by financing cooperative multi-faith

agricultural ventures, backing young local cultural entrepreneurs, and enforcing ethical, transparent governance to yield transformative socio-economic progress.

Recommendations

To operationalize these insights, local, state, and federal administrative bodies should execute the following five strategic policies:

1. Transparent Resource Administration : Implement open-source, digitally auditable budgeting systems for the distribution of public resources, land allocations, and critical infrastructure projects. Ensuring total transparency directly neutralizes the accurate perceptions of ethnic and regional bias that elites use to trigger identity-based conflict.
2. Establish Legally Recognized Cultural Councils: State and federal governments must pass legislation establishing independent, legally recognized cultural councils. These bodies must include creative arts practitioners, minority language preservationists, and diverse religious leaders tasked with advising on public policy and distributing cultural grants transparently.
3. Integrate the Traditional Economy into Macro-Planning: Formally classify the creative arts, heritage tourism, and traditional craft economies as vital sectors within national economic strategic plans. Provide targeted small-business grants, formal marketing support, and intellectual property protections to local cultural entrepreneurs.
4. Execute Comprehensive Curricula Reform: Redesign primary and secondary public school curricula to include mandatory modules on alternative conflict resolution, comparative religious studies, and the history of regional pluralism. These modules must be contextually tailored to local languages and historical realities to foster early childhood tolerance.
5. Scale Local Interfaith Mediation Platforms: Provide state funding to scale up locally run interfaith councils and crisis-mediation boards. These platforms must pair traditional religious leaders with equal youth and civil society representation, ensuring swift local intervention before minor communal disputes escalate.

Challenges and Opportunities

The contemporary African path forward is defined by a sharp contrast between systemic challenges and profound opportunities. The primary obstacles blocking national cohesion consist of entrenched ethnic tensions, the ongoing political weaponization of religious institutions, and severe, destabilizing economic inequality.

However, these challenges are countered by immense opportunities within grassroots peacebuilding frameworks, highly dynamic avenues of cultural diplomacy, and the untapped development power of faith-based economic alliances. Africa‟s deep moral and cultural heritage, if intentionally nurtured through institutional justice and radical administrative inclusion, can serve as a powerful global blueprint for navigating pluralism and building sustainable coexistence in the modern world.

Conclusion

Cultural diversity and religious pluralism are inherently neither automated paths to peace nor destined triggers for violent conflict. The final societal outcome depends entirely on the transparency of state governance, the inclusivity of public policy, and the structural integrity of institutions designed to channel human differences into collective public goods. The complex case of Nigeria clearly demonstrates that carefully executed, locally owned cultural and interfaith interventions when fully backed by accountable public policy can successfully transform identity pluralism from a volatile security threat into a powerful engine for structural peace, deep social cohesion, and sustainable economic development.

To this end, religion and culture across the African continent, and within Nigeria specifically, remain profoundly intertwined forces capable of engineering a peaceful, highly prosperous society. When public governance is intentionally grounded in absolute mutual respect and the legal verification of shared humanity, identity diversity transforms into a resilient source of societal harmony. Rightly and equitably managed, cultural and religious pluralism holds the definitive key to Africa‟s moral, social, and economic renaissance.

Reference

Aboekwe, M. E. "Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Peace Building in Nigeria." *Journal of Arts, Social Sciences and Development*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 45–61.

Achebe, Chinua. *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Heinemann, 1983.

Bakare, N. "The Politics of Visibility in the Public Sphere: Ethno-Religious Manifestations in Contemporary West Africa." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2025, pp. 112–134.

Crowther Journal of Arts and Humanities. "The Role of Religion in the Nigerian Society." *Crowther Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 4, Aug. 2025, pp. 78–95.

Demarest, L. "Ethnic Diversity and Intergroup Relations among Nigerian Adolescents." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 116, 2025, article 1046. *ScienceDirect*, doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2024.1046.

Ehusani, George. *An Afro-Christian Vision: "Ozovehe"!* University Press of America,

1991. Falola, Toyin. *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*. Greenwood Press, 2001.

Gbadeyan, O. J. "Religious Tolerance and Peace Building in Nigeria." *BIAR Journal of Education, Linguistics and Literature (EconomIT)*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2023, pp. 140–155.

Igwe, P. A. "Nigerian Identity Crisis: Colonial Legacies and Ethno-Social Identity Fragmentation." *Journal of Postcolonial Development*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2025, pp. 201–218.

Jatau, V. "Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Structural Vulnerabilities and Collaborative Pathways." *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 10, 2023, article 1305. *MDPI*, doi:10.3390/rel14101305.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Educational Books, 1999.

Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). *Interfaith Peacebuilding in Nigeria:*

Strategic
Reports 2020–2024. NIREC Publications, 2024.

Njoku, R. C. "Prophets, Soothsayers, and the Nigerian Political Kingdom: The Institutionalization of Faith-Based Mobilization." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2025, pp. 156–175.

Omotosho, M. "Cultural Diversity and the Challenge of Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria." *EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2020, pp. 224–233.

Roelofs, P. “Contesting Localisation in Interfaith Peacebuilding: Donor Dynamics and Grassroots Realities in Northern Nigeria.” *International Journal of Conflict and ,*

Development, vol. 14, no. 3, 2020, pp. 311–329. *Taylor & Francis*.

Tuki, D. “Violent Conflict and Hostility Towards Ethnoreligious Outgroups: Empirical Evidence from the Middle Belt.” *Journal of Peace and Conflict Research*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2025, pp. 67–88. *Taylor & Francis*.