


From ritual to renewal: Religious festivals as catalysts for national unity in Nigeria

**Author:**Chioma P. Onuorah^{1,2} **Affiliations:**¹Humanities Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria²Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Chioma Onuorah,
chioma.onuorah@unn.edu.ng**Dates:**

Received: 04 June 2025

Accepted: 11 Aug. 2025

Published: 18 Sept. 2025

How to cite this article:Onuorah, C.P., 2025, 'From ritual to renewal: Religious festivals as catalysts for national unity in Nigeria', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10860. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10860>**Copyright:**© 2025. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Religious festivals and ceremonies are more than spiritual expressions; they are vital cultural activities that reflect shared beliefs, foster identity and promote unity among adherents. In Nigeria, where religious and ethnic diversity is profound, these festivals often serve as powerful tools for community bonding and cultural continuity. However, despite their unifying potential, religious interactions are frequently marred by intolerance, conflict and political manipulation, which threaten the peace and development of the nation. This article explores the intersection of religious festivals, social harmony and sustainable development, focusing on how these communal celebrations can be harnessed to foster peace and coexistence among Nigeria's major religious groups: Christianity, Islam and traditional African religion. Employing a qualitative research approach that includes interviews, document analysis and participant observation, the study investigates the cultural and social significance of religious festivals. Findings reveal that when inclusively celebrated, these festivals create spaces for interfaith dialogue, cultural education and mutual respect. They help reduce prejudices, heal divisions and provide opportunities for collaborative community development. The article argues that policy frameworks and religious leadership should recognise and support these festivals as tools for peacebuilding and national integration. The article concludes that, when properly harnessed, religious festivals have the potential to harmonise communities, mitigate conflicts and contribute meaningfully to Nigeria's development agenda.

Contribution: This study significantly contributes to understanding religious festivals in Nigeria as instruments of peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue and national development. It offers original insights into their ability to enhance social cohesion, mitigate religious tensions and support sustainable progress, thereby enriching both scholarly discourse and policy formulation.

Keywords: religious festivals; interfaith dialogue; peacebuilding; cultural integration; community development.

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of immense religious diversity, where multiple faith communities coexist, sharing overlapping cultural practices, but often harbouring conflicting perceptions. While many religious adherents espouse ideals of peace, tolerance and unity, intergroup relations are frequently characterised by distrust and hostility. This tension arises from entrenched prejudices, as each group tends to view its faith as superior while regarding others as inferior. Such attitudes have fuelled sectarian tensions, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence that disrupt social cohesion and hinder national development (Ezeanya et al. 2022; Onuorah 2018a:339). Notable episodes of religious conflict include the 1980 Maitatsine uprising in Kano and the disturbances in Kafanchan, Ilorin and Zango Kataf between 1987 and 1992 (Adamolekun 2000:225; Eniola 2010).

Despite these recurring tensions, Islam and Christianity profess belief in a supreme being, Allah or God, and claim to be rooted in peace (Efe 2010:353). Yet, ignorance of core religious teachings continues to drive violence, casting a shadow over the country's quest for unity and development (Falola 1998; Umaru 2013:52). Thus, religious festivals have emerged as underexplored, yet potentially transformative tools for peacebuilding, cultural preservation and sustainable development.

Globally, religion has long served as a framework for social organisation and moral conduct (Hertog 2010). It shapes how individuals understand their place in the world and

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

interact with others. However, in some parts of the world, such as Europe and North America, this role has been increasingly contested by science, technology and democratic values. In Nigeria, religious festivals such as Eid-al-Fitr, Christmas and traditional rites such as the New Yam festival are deeply embedded in communal life. These festivals are not only spiritual expressions, but also serve as socio-cultural events that promote unity, create spaces for dialogue and contribute to economic vitality (Eze et al. 2021; George & Reid 2005:88; Njoku 2020). Through music, rituals, myths and symbols, they convey collective values and religious beliefs (Mbiti 1975), offering a sense of identity and belonging (Volf & Blair 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of these festivals and their socio-cultural significance, scholarly attention to their role in promoting interfaith harmony, conflict resolution and economic progress remains limited. Most existing studies focus narrowly on religious or cultural aspects, often ignoring the festivals' capacity to foster peace and national development. Anecdotal evidence suggests that religious festivals in Nigeria do encourage interfaith encounters and community engagement, yet systematic empirical research on their contributions to peacebuilding is largely absent.

This study investigates the transformative role of religious festivals in promoting peace and development in Nigeria, focusing on their influence on personal values, communal cohesion and interreligious dialogue. Although these festivals symbolise unity and cultural identity, enduring challenges hinder their potential to foster lasting interfaith harmony and national integration. By examining how group-specific festivals can transcend their particularistic roots, the study fills a critical gap in the literature, offering empirical insights into their capacity to facilitate dialogue, conflict resolution and inclusive development. It highlights the complex interplay between religion and social unity in a pluralistic context.

Conceptual clarifications

To foster deeper critical engagement, it is essential to define the key terms such as religion, festivals, peace and development, which anchor the study's theoretical and analytical framework. Clarifying these concepts establishes a foundation for examining their interrelated roles within Nigeria's socio-cultural context. This definitional clarity situates the study within scholarly discourse and supports a systematic analysis of how these elements collectively influence national unity and development in a religiously diverse society.

Religion

Religion constitutes a multifaceted aspect of human experience, reflected in actions that convey an individual's reliance on a transcendent force regarded as fundamental to existence. According to Agha (2012:47), religion embodies a dimension of life through which people articulate their bond

with a supreme reality believed to influence their fate and essence. Omoregbe (1999:4) conceptualises religion as 'an interpersonal relationship between a man and a transcendent personal being believed to exist', underscoring the personal, yet profound nature of this connection. Far from being purely metaphysical, this relationship materialises through collective worship, the transmission of moral teachings and the cultivation of ethical conduct. As Onuorah (2018b:202) asserts, religion plays a dual role: it bridges the human-divine divide while simultaneously promoting social cohesion. In this regard, religion connects individuals to a higher power or divine and thus emerges as a key driver of moral orientation and societal order, shaping belief systems, ethical norms and patterns of human interaction.

Festival

A festival is typically a designated time of public celebration, often anchored in religious or cultural traditions, marked by ritual observances, feasting, performances and communal gathering (Allen, Harris & Jago 2022). Famuyiwa (1992) describes festivals as:

[P]eriodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety or merry-making set aside by a community or clan for the observance of sacred celebrations, religious solemnities, or musical and traditional performances of special significance. (p. 83)

These events often serve as sites of historical memory, spiritual devotion and social bonding. In African traditional religious perspectives, according to Famuyiwa (1992:83), festivals function as communal expressions of joy, often commemorating pivotal religious or mythological events, during which sacrifices are made to deities believed to control critical aspects of life such as fertility, rainfall and prosperity.

Opoku (1990:71) defines festivals as 'recurring rituals that express communal beliefs, commemorate significant historical, cultural, or religious events, and foster community cohesion through meaningful re-enactments and rituals aimed at achieving specific outcomes and satisfaction'. Religious festivals, in particular, are moments of profound spiritual significance, usually celebrated cyclically according to either the solar or lunar calendar (<https://www.definitions.net/definition/religious+festival>). In Nigeria, these festivals serve not only as sacred rites, but also as cultural expressions observed annually or according to specific calendrical systems. Awolalu and Dopamu (2005:153) note that 'most festivals are associated with specific divinities, spirits, or ancestors, and they are, therefore, religious in outlook'. While these events may not always align with the historical dates of the occurrences they commemorate, they are traditionally fixed by religious authorities and followed by adherents for spiritual and communal purposes (Eneh 2001).

Development

Development is a dynamic, integrative process encompassing economic growth, social transformation, environmental

sustainability and demographic change. Religious festivals contribute by promoting inclusion, social capital and community cohesion through a culturally rooted approach. As Israel (2018) explains, development involves generating conditions that facilitate meaningful growth and transformation, ultimately enhancing the quality of human life. While it is frequently understood through an economic lens emphasising the efficient utilisation of resources to improve both individual and collective well-being (Rabie 2016), its scope extends far beyond material considerations.

Aworom (2002) underscores that true national development requires ongoing enhancement of both tangible and intangible aspects of life, rooted in values that affirm human dignity and promote social equity. Development necessitates a holistic approach, integrating economic, social, ethical and cultural dimensions. However, it must also critically navigate tensions between certain religious beliefs and practices and principles such as scientific evidence, human rights, gender equality and public health.

Peace

The term 'peace' is etymologically derived from the Anglo-Norman term *pas*, denoting the absence of civil strife (Nwoliye 2009:249). Nwoliye (2009:249) further traces the origin of the modern English term to *pax* in Latin and *eirene* in Greek, both of which stem from the Hebrew *shalom* and share linguistic and conceptual parallels with the Arabic *salaam*. Collectively, these terms connote a holistic state of well-being, security, harmony and prosperity. This study employs peace as a critical lens to explore the interreligious and social functions of religious festivals.

Peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the presence of constructive conflict resolution and equitable participation in social, economic and political life. According to International Alert (2020), peace implies a state in which citizens influence governance, have equal access to employment opportunities and are protected by a fair legal system. It also entails mutual respect, trust in judicial institutions and legal safeguards against violence and discrimination. Peace, therefore, is viewed as a practical necessity that festivals can promote through symbolic reconciliation and inclusive social spaces, supporting broader coexistence in plural societies.

Theoretical framework

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and colleagues, explains how individuals shape their self-concept through affiliations with social groups like religion, nationality, ethnicity or gender (Gürsoy Erdenay 2025:25). The theory highlights how social identities influence attitudes and behaviours towards in-group and out-group members. These identities are most impactful when individuals view their group membership as central to their self-concept and share strong emotional connections with the group, enhancing self-esteem and reinforcing social identity.

Key mechanisms of social identity include adherence to in-group norms (intra-group assimilation) and intergroup biases, such as in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice (Brown & Pehrson 2019). While these processes foster cohesion, they can also reinforce exclusion. Social identity theory helps explain how identity salience shifts across contexts, shaping behaviour and perception (Bigler & Liben 2007:162; Hewstone, Rubin & Willis 2002). Thus, initiatives like religious festivals must navigate these dynamics carefully to avoid reinforcing divisive boundaries.

Research indicates that when social identities are emphasised, it often leads to group stereotyping and prejudice. Conversely, when intergroup distinctions are minimised, it has the potential to reduce prejudice (Hewstone et al. 2002:580). This theory examines how group-specific religious festivals can foster intergroup cooperation and reduce conflict by promoting positive interaction and a shared identity. When inclusive, such events can enhance relations across diverse communities.

Research methods and design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the role of religious festivals in peacebuilding and development within Nigeria's religiously diverse context. Valued for its capacity to capture nuanced lived experiences, cultural meanings and social dynamics, the approach offers deep insight into these celebrations. Participants, including religious leaders, festival coordinators and community stakeholders, were purposively selected based on their active involvement in interfaith activities and festival practices, as well as their experiential knowledge. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. Ten participants provided a diverse, yet focused range of perspectives, enabling in-depth and manageable analysis. Observational fieldwork during selected festivals enriched the study with a contextual understanding of ritual practices and intergroup relations.

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews, yielding detailed personal narratives and insights into the social significance of religious festivals. These were supplemented by secondary sources such as religious and cultural texts, academic journals, encyclopaedias and reputable online materials, which offered historical context and theoretical grounding. Thematic analysis was used to systematically interpret the data, identifying recurring themes such as social cohesion, religious tolerance and community development. This method enabled a holistic understanding of the strategic role religious festivals play in fostering national unity and sustainable development, with secondary literature enhancing the study's credibility and analytical rigour.

An overview of religions and religious festivals among the people of Nigeria

Nigeria has three major religions: indigenous traditional religions, Christianity and Islam, each enriching its cultural

diversity. The three main ethnic groups, Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, have distinct cultural and religious practices. Religious distribution varies regionally: the north is predominantly Muslim (95%), the west is mixed (60% Christian, 30% Muslim and 10% traditional religions) and the east and south are predominantly Christian (99%). Nationally, the religious composition is about 49.3% Christian, 48.8% Muslim and 1.9% adhering to traditional or other beliefs (Pew Research Centre 2012). This partial alignment complicates assumptions of ethnic-religious unity, as religion can both reinforce and challenge divisions. Nonetheless, these communities often coexist through mutual engagement and cultural interdependence.

Each major religion in Nigeria observes unique festivals that are deeply embedded in its spiritual ethos and cultural traditions. For Christians, key celebrations include Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ (Farman 2022:46), as well as Good Friday, marking his crucifixion and Easter, which celebrates his resurrection (Athnos 2023). These religious observances are typically accompanied by liturgical rituals, communal meals, philanthropic gestures and the giving of gifts. In the Igbo-dominated South-East region, such Christian festivities are often enriched by the inclusion of indigenous masquerade performances, reflecting a syncretic fusion of Christian and traditional elements. This cultural integration not only reinforces communal bonds, but also preserves indigenous identity within the framework of Christian celebration, promoting social harmony and cultural continuity.

Within the Islamic tradition, major religious festivals include Eid-al-Fitr, which signifies the end of the sacred month of Ramadan and Eid-el-Kabir, which honours Prophet Ibrahim's devotion and readiness to sacrifice his son in submission to God's will (Eneh 2001). These commemorations are marked by collective worship, acts of charity, shared feasting and expressions of communal unity. Through these practices, the festivals reinforce core Islamic values such as gratitude, spiritual devotion and commitment to social responsibility, thereby strengthening both individual faith and collective welfare within the Muslim *ummah*.

Adherents of indigenous African religions observe numerous traditional festivals that invoke ancestral spirits and deities, maintaining harmony between the human and spiritual realms (Onuorah & Eze 2024). Among the Igbo, festivals such as *Igu Aro* (the new lunar year, ushering in the planting season), *Mmuonwu* (masquerade), *Ofala* (annual royal festival honouring the New Yam) and New Yam are marked by vibrant displays of masquerades, music and dance, often drawing local and international tourists (Egbo 2021). In Yoruba communities, festivals dedicated to deities such as Ifa, Ogun, Sango and Osun, particularly the internationally renowned Osun-Osogbo Festival, underscore the rich ritual sophistication of the culture (Oyeweso 2013). Among the Hausa-Fulani, Islamic traditions have become deeply entwined with pre-Islamic cultural practices, shaping community life and reinforcing religious norms (Adamu 1978 as cited in Gusil 2020).

Cultural and spiritual dimensions of religious festivals

Religious festivals across Nigeria's diverse traditions represent multifaceted expressions of spiritual devotion and cultural heritage. Characterised by liturgical practices, ritual performances, music, dance and traditional attire, these festivals serve as dynamic platforms for the preservation of intangible cultural knowledge and the reinforcement of social cohesion. Far beyond their liturgical functions, these observances review cosmological narratives, transmit oral histories and showcase indigenous artistic traditions, thereby sustaining collective memory and cultural identity.

Functioning as instruments of both cultural continuity and social integration, religious festivals play a pivotal role in reinforcing communal bonds and facilitating spiritual renewal. They cultivate a shared sense of belonging among participants by reaffirming ethical values and promoting norms that sustain intergenerational cohesion. Moreover, these events offer structured spaces for moral instruction, thanksgiving and reflection, key elements that nurture both personal spirituality and communal solidarity (Njoku 2020).

Cultural and religious practices in Nigeria foster unity by blending spiritual rituals with everyday life through vibrant festivals. These festivals promote unity by celebrating diversity, challenging stereotypes and fostering social cohesion. These events bridge sacred and secular realms, promoting empathy, interfaith dialogue and national integration. Initiatives such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, jointly led by Muslim and Christian leaders, have played a vital role in promoting peace and mutual understanding (Saleh 2022).

Festivals as instruments of peace and unity

In present-day Nigerian society, religious festivals play a pivotal role in advancing peace and social integration. They operate as unifying platforms that draw participants from various religious and cultural affiliations, thereby cultivating a collective sense of identity and mutual purpose. The intersection of indigenous traditions and Western-influenced religious practices within these celebratory contexts illustrates an evolving pattern of interfaith engagement and coexistence. The Osun Oshogbo festival, for example, draws a global audience, attracting thousands of devotees, observers and international tourists who converge to participate in and witness this significant cultural event. It holds global importance and cultural significance, as noted by Probst (2011). This dynamic not only reflects Nigeria's pluralistic religious landscape, but also aligns with broader global movements towards interreligious harmony and collaborative cultural expression.

Festivals, as informant 1 emphasises, function as powerful unifiers, fostering a deep sense of belonging, mutual love and fraternity among participants. They transcend mere ritual to become enduring expressions of key religious

tenets and moral imperatives, which reinforce core community values. The festival promotes both regional identity and national unity, showing how local traditions can support broader cohesion without losing their unique cultural character. These celebrations not only affirm collective religious identities, but also disseminate values that enhance social harmony. Informant 2 further notes that religious festivals serve as custodians of heritage, enabling the wider public to appreciate and internalise the religious teachings embedded within them. The Ofala Festival in the Southeast, while rooted in Igbo traditional religion, draws participation from Christians and Muslims alike, highlighting the festival's integrative potential.

Oderinde (2018:3) aptly characterises festivals as 'sacred times marked by the suspension of everyday social constraints, offering heightened opportunities for solidarity'. In this liminal space, as Nirmal (1976) explains, festivals commemorate foundational religious truths, while Ogunba (1987:88) asserts that 'these rites serve as chief vehicles of religious expression, accommodating and reflecting the lived experiences of the entire community'.

Festivals also play a symbolic role in healing fractured relationships and rekindling communal bonds. As informant 3 observes, these celebrations provide occasions for reconciliation and spiritual reorientation, while informant 4 describes them as inclusive gatherings that foster unity through collective worship, thanksgiving, and communal feasting. In this regard, festivals act not only as religious observances, but also as platforms for social reintegration.

Roles in conflict resolution and interfaith relations

Religious festivals are instrumental in conflict resolution and the promotion of interfaith relations. Informant 5 points out that acts of sacrifice, prayer and thanksgiving during festivals serve to renew the relationship between humanity and the divine, reaffirming spiritual commitments while also addressing communal concerns. These ritualised interactions serve as moral recalibrations, fostering forgiveness, mercy and collective well-being.

The communal dimension of religious festivals encourages inclusive participation, transcending sectarian divides. Informant 6 notes that the collective spirit fostered through shared celebration promotes social tranquillity, which in turn contributes to societal harmony and national development. Festivals can help transform exclusionary societal values by providing opportunities for cultural redefinition and fostering positive change. Nguyen (2025:14) emphasises their integrative role, describing festivals as 'religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society, imbuing human life with both solemnity and celebration'. As traditions evolve, festivals can shed discriminatory practices, promote inclusivity and reaffirm principles such as compassion, justice and solidarity, thus not only reflecting but reshaping societal values.

Moreover, informant 7 highlights the rejuvenating impact of festivals on group dynamics, noting that these events strengthen the unity and resilience of communities. Religious festivals often seek divine favour and ancestral blessings, reinforcing spiritual and psychological well-being. These practices are not signs of fatalism, expressions of communal hope, moral responsibility and spiritual grounding. Islam and Christianity emphasise the connection between faith and action, reflecting a deep-seated commitment to moral values and community solidarity.

Religious festivals further reinforce the belief in the coexistence of tangible and intangible realms, which is central to many African cosmologies. Informant 8 emphasises that collective prayers during such festivals often focus on universal peace, explicitly rejecting social disorder and conflict. These events also function as pedagogical tools, imparting religious values and behavioural norms to the younger generation, thus ensuring cultural continuity and social stability.

The inclusive nature of religious festivals is evidenced by the influx of visitors from outside local communities. According to informant 9, this temporary demographic expansion reflects a culture of hospitality and intercommunal bonding. Informant 10 further observes that this increased influx of people boosts local economies through heightened demand for goods, services and transportation, thereby contributing to broader development goals.

Gómez-Ullate and Saraiva (2024:369) note that religious festivals also serve as arenas for artistic expression and emotional release, providing entertainment and showcasing cultural creativity through music, drama and oral traditions. This illustrates how festivals merge the sacred with the socio-political and economic, thereby embodying a holistic approach to development.

The successful organisation of these events depends on the support and participation of diverse religious groups. Their commitment to tolerance and peaceful coexistence during such celebrations significantly contributes to national peace and development. Furthermore, the positioning of religious festivals as cultural and tourism attractions enhances their capacity to promote unity and interfaith understanding. The Osun-Osogbo Festival in the Southwest, for instance, has gained international attention, functioning as both a religious and touristic event that unites diverse audiences around shared cultural heritage.

The objectives outlined by the National Arts Council align with the strategic importance of religious festivals. As Famuyiwa (1992:88) states, these include the revitalisation and dissemination of African cultural values, the promotion of international and interracial understanding, and the global exposure of African artistic talent. By facilitating these aims, religious festivals contribute to both local empowerment and global cultural diplomacy.

In addition to their spiritual and social roles, festivals offer platforms for showcasing leadership and institutional roles within religious and traditional settings. As Cailliois (2001) observes, religious festivals affirm societal sanctity by reinforcing shared moral values and emphasising ritual purity through preparation, conduct and symbolic cleansing, thereby aligning individual behaviour with communal norms. They also showcase talents in music, dance, craftsmanship, oratory and leadership, fostering moral, aesthetic and intellectual growth. Thus, they promote holistic human development through ethical, creative and communal engagement.

Challenges to religious harmony

Religious festivals in Nigeria powerfully express unity and cultural resilience, yet structural and ideological challenges rooted in the nation's complex socio-religious and political landscape constrain their full potential to advance religious peace and national development.

Religious intolerance and exclusivist theologies

Persistent religious intolerance and exclusivist theological views undermine efforts towards interfaith harmony. Despite the inclusive orientation of many festivals, some religious leaders discourage interfaith participation, perceiving it as a compromise of doctrinal purity (Efe 2010). This reluctance to engage across religious boundaries reinforces sectarian divisions, thereby weakening the capacity of religious festivals to promote national cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Political and socio-structural impediments

Political and social barriers undermine the unifying potential of religious festivals in Nigeria. Ethno-religious politics often distort these events, as leaders exploit religious sentiments to secure support, heightening tension (Aboi 2024). Compounding these issues are infrastructural deficits such as inadequate transportation, poor public facilities and insufficient crowd-control mechanisms that limit inclusive and safe participation. Insecurity poses a further threat, particularly in conflict-prone regions where extremist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) target religious gatherings as symbols of unity, undermining communal trust (Mshelia 2024:81). These dynamics not only threaten lives but also diminish the festivals' capacity to foster interreligious peace and civic engagement.

Commercialisation and spiritual dilution

The increasing commercialisation of religious festivals raises concerns about the erosion of their spiritual and moral essence. Hackett (2022) cautions that profit-driven tourism can dilute the educational, ethical and reconciliatory functions of these events. While economic benefits are acknowledged, the prioritisation of commercial interests over spiritual depth risks weakening their developmental value.

Religious festivals as catalysts for national unity in Nigeria

Religious festivals in Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape serve as inclusive spaces where complex beliefs and identities intersect, fostering shared experiences and transformation among participants of varied backgrounds, including non-religious individuals. As a nation marked by deep-seated ethnic, cultural and religious diversity often coupled with historical tensions, these festivals transcend their religious significance and may serve as unifying social institutions. These events cultivate harmony and national identity by fostering civic dialogue, tolerance and social cohesion through open engagement across diverse worldviews, promoting intercommunal cooperation. The reasons for perceiving religious festivals as vital to national unity in Nigeria can be unpacked across several key dimensions:

Facilitating interreligious and interethnic engagement

Religious festivals provide rare and valuable opportunities for meaningful interaction among Nigerians of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds. In urban and heterogeneous settings, it is commonplace for individuals outside a particular religious tradition to participate in or observe its festive activities. For instance, during festivals like Eid or Christmas, it is common to see Christians and Muslims exchange greetings and partake in each other's celebrations, fostering goodwill and mutual respect. Through the exchange of greetings, food and communal participation, these events promote peaceful coexistence and deepen social bonds across divides.

Emphasising common cultural heritage

While rooted in religious doctrine, many festivals in Nigeria incorporate traditional practices such as music, dance, masquerades and oral storytelling. These elements reflect shared cultural values that cut across religious boundaries. By blending religious observance with cultural expression, such festivals nurture a sense of common heritage and help consolidate national identity.

Encouraging collective experience and communal unity

Festive occasions often feature acts of charity, public feasts and large communal gatherings that inspire collective joy and unity. These experiences cultivate social solidarity, as individuals from different backgrounds join together in celebration. The shared emotional and spiritual atmosphere fosters trust, inclusion and mutual appreciation, thereby strengthening the fabric of national unity.

Supporting peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts

In regions troubled by sectarian conflict or intergroup hostility, religious festivals provide opportunities for reconciliation and healing. Religious leaders and community elders often use these periods to promote messages of forgiveness, tolerance and peace. As observed in several peace initiatives in northern Nigeria, such as interfaith prayer

sessions during Eid or Christmas, these interventions have fostered dialogue and reduced tensions between Christian and Muslim communities (Blackmer & Akila 2024; Komolafe 2019). Such interventions are particularly impactful when delivered during festive seasons, as they draw on the spiritual ethos and collective mood of goodwill.

Stimulating economic exchange and social interaction

Religious festivities generate economic activity across various sectors, including markets, transportation, hospitality and entertainment. The commerce surrounding these events fosters economic interdependence among people of diverse backgrounds. This economic cooperation not only reduces socio-religious tension, but also contributes to a shared sense of prosperity and social mobility. It is essential to strike a balance between material incentives and cultural integrity, ensuring that economic dimensions serve, rather than overshadow, the festivals' deeper purposes.

Serving as platforms for national advocacy and civic engagement

Given their wide reach and cultural significance, religious festivals are frequently leveraged by political leaders, civil society actors and traditional authorities to disseminate messages of national importance. These occasions are used to promote civic values such as unity, responsibility and peaceful coexistence (Opara 2024). As a result, religious festivals become strategic tools for reinforcing national consciousness and public ethics.

Affirming Nigeria's religious pluralism

The official recognition of religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-el-Kabir as public observances exemplifies Nigeria's commitment to religious inclusivity. This institutional acknowledgement of diverse religious traditions fosters a sense of belonging among different groups, reinforcing the notion that national unity can thrive within a framework of pluralism and mutual respect.

Recommendations

To harness religious festivals for peace and development, the following recommendations emerged:

- Governments and civil society should create policies recognising festivals as civic engagement platforms, ensuring funding, infrastructure and legal protections for minority groups.
- Leaders can foster collaboration, co-host festivals and highlight shared teachings to promote reconciliation and moral instruction.
- Media should promote inclusive stories about festivals to counter divisive discourse and reinforce unity.
- Scholars should study festivals' social, economic and spiritual impacts to inform policy and training programmes.
- Local organisations should integrate activities such as interfaith dialogues and community service into festivals, engaging youth and marginalised groups to strengthen communal ties.

Conclusion

This study highlights the cultural, spiritual and socio-political significance of religious festivals in Nigeria. It shows that, beyond doctrine, festivals foster communal identity, spiritual renewal and social cohesion. They preserve indigenous knowledge, promote interethnic dialogue and uphold ethical values. Despite challenges such as intolerance and politicisation, these festivals remain vital tools for peacebuilding and sustainable development.

Religious festivals in Nigeria transcend ceremonial functions, serving as crucial instruments for cultural preservation, interfaith harmony and national integration. Through shared rituals and communal participation, they foster mutual understanding, reinforce collective identity and promote tolerance and empathy. This study highlights their potential to enhance civic engagement, stimulate intercultural dialogue and catalyse social transformation, thereby advancing unity, democratic values and sustainable development in a pluralistic society.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

C.P.O. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee of the Humanities Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, on 05 June 2025.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author or the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Aboi, E.J., 2024, 'Religious, ethnic and regional identities in Nigerian politics: A shared interest theory', *African Identities*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2024.2394181>

- Adamolekun, T., 2000, 'Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria: A historical perspective', *African Studies Review* 2(1), 223–235.
- Agha, A.U., 2012, *Religion and culture in a permissive society*, SAPS Press, Enugu.
- Allen, J., Harris, R. & Jago, L., 2022, *Festival & special event management*, John Wiley & Sons, NJ, New Jersey.
- Athnos, G.S., 2023, *The Easter Jesus and the Good Friday Church: Reclaiming the centrality of the resurrection*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, OR, Oregon.
- Awolalu, J.O. & Dopamu, P.A., 2005, *West Africa traditional religion (Revised Edition)*, Macmillan, Ibadan.
- Aworom, A., 2002, 'National development in Nigeria: The artist role', *African Journal of Culture and Society* 2(1), 1–8.
- Blackmer, G. & Akila, Y.A., 2024, 'Conflicts in Northern Nigeria and the role of (inter-) religious education in peacebuilding', *African Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 2(1), 187–212. <https://doi.org/10.62154/ajrts.2024.02.010545>
- Bigler, R.S. & Liben, L.S., 2007, 'Developmental intergroup theory: Explaining and reducing children's social stereotyping and prejudice', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16(3), 162–166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00496.x>
- Brown, R. & Pehrson, S., 2019, *Group processes: Dynamics within and between groups*, John Wiley & Sons, NJ, New Jersey.
- Caillios, R., 2001, *Man and the Sacred*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, IL.
- Efe, E., 2010, 'Curbing religious violence in a pluralistic society: A Christian perspective', in R.A. Akanmidu (ed.), *Thoughts in the humanities*, p. 353, Decency Printers Ltd, Ilorin.
- Egbo, N., 2021, *Iwaji – The New Yam festival in Igbo land*, viewed 12 May 2025, from <https://guardian.ng/life/iwaji-the-new-yam-festival-in-igbo-land...2021>.
- Eneh, J.O., 2001, *The Sharia and Islamic philosophy: The Nigerian experience*, Jovel Computer Ventures, Enugu.
- Eniola, S.O., 2010, 'Reflections of religious violence in Nigeria', in A. Kunle (ed.), *Introduction to peace and conflict studies: The Nigeria perspective*, pp. 77–81, University of Ado-Ekiti Press, Ado-Ekiti.
- Eze, A.U., Onuorah, C.P., Agbo, P.O. & Enweonwu, O.A., 2021, 'Religious festivals: A vehicle for peace and development in Nigeria', in J.O. Uzuegbu, C.O. Agbo, J.N. Akah, C.A. Ezema & J.I. Obayi (eds.), *Nigerian peoples and cultures with selected topics on Igbo culture*, pp. 83–106, Newland Designs and Print Solution, Enugu.
- Ezeanya, O.C., Ajah, B.O., Ibenwa, C.N., Onuorah, C.P. & Eze, U.A., 2022, 'A critical analysis of the impact of religion on the Nigerian struggle for nationhood', *HTS Theologise Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), 7225. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7225>
- Falola, T., 1998, *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis religious politics and secular ideologies*, University of Rochester Press, New York, NY.
- Famuyiwa, J., 1992, 'The role of traditional festivals and modern festivals of arts and culture in the promotion of cultural education in Nigeria', *Nigerian Heritage: Journal of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments* 1, pp. 82–88.
- Farman, M., 2022, 'The historicity of Christmas: An analytical view', *Al Misbah Research Journal* 2(04), 46–53.
- George, E.W. & Reid, D.G., 2005, 'The power of tourism: A metamorphosis of community culture', *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 3(2), 88–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580508668489>
- Gómez-Ullate, M. & Saraiva, S.S., 2024, 'Festivals and youth: An educational cultural route to festivals', *Youth* 4(1), 369–381. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4010026>
- Gürsoy Erdenay, H.E., 2025, 'The theoretical framework for social identity', in H.E. Gürsoy Erdenay (ed.), *Georgian internally displaced people: The formation of a social identity*, pp. 25–45, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham.
- Gusil, H., 2020, *Hausa – Religion and expressive culture*, viewed 11 August 2023, from <https://www.HausaForum>.
- Hackett, R.I., 2022, 'From festive sacred to festive secular? Indigenous religious presence in two Nigerian festivals', *Numen* 69(4), 341–389. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341663>
- Hertog, K., 2010, *The complex reality of religious peace building: Conceptual contributions and critical analysis*, Lexington Books, MD, Maryland.
- Hewstone, M., Rubin, M. & Willis, H., 2002, 'Intergroup bias', *Annual Review of Psychology* 53(1), 575–604. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135109>
- International Alert, 2020, *What is peace?*, viewed 12 May 2025, from <https://www.international-alert.org/what-we-do/what-is-peace>.
- Israel, S., 2018, *What is development?*, viewed 12 May 2025, from <https://www.sid-israel.org/en/Development-Issues/What-is-Development>.
- Komolafe, H.D., 2019, 'Christian and Muslim relationship in Ilorin Metropolis: A model for peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious society', *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 9(2), 53–62.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1975, *African religions and philosophy*, Heinemann, London.
- Mshelia, I.H., 2024, 'The rising religious extremism and mob violence in Nigeria: Threats to national integration and sustainable development', *Clinical Sociology Review* 19(1), 81–119. <https://doi.org/10.36615/w54nrm56>
- Nguyen, M.T., 2025, 'Traditional festivals in Southeast Asia: Unity in diversity', *Jurnal ISO: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Politik dan Humaniora* 5(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.53697/iso.v5i1.2321>
- Nirmal, A.P., 1976, 'Celebration of Indian festivals', in J.B. Taylor (ed.), *Primal world*, pp. 79–83, Daystar Press, Ibadan.
- Njoku, R.C., 2020, *West African masking traditions and diaspora masquerade carnivals: History, memory, and transnationalism*, Boydell & Brew, Martlesham.
- Nwolise, O.B.C., 2009, 'Peace and security in praxis of political concepts and clichés in Nigeria's fourth republic', in I.O. Albert (ed.), *Essay in honour of Dr. Muazu Babangida Aliyu*, pp. 245–289, Bookcraft, Ibadan.
- Oderinde, O., 2018, 'The lore of religious festivals among the Yoruba and its social relevance', *Lumina* 22(20), 1–4.
- Ogunba, O., 1987, 'Ceremonies', in S.O. Biobaku (ed.), *Sources of Yoruba history*, University Press, Ibadan.
- Omogrebe, J., 1999, *Comparative religion: Christianity and other world religions in dialogue*, Joja Educational Research, Lagos.
- Onuorah, C.P., 2018a, 'Ethno-religious conflict: A challenge to national integration in Nigerian Contemporary society', *HOFA: African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 3(1), 338–352.
- Onuorah, C.P., 2018b, 'Things fall apart: The portrayal of cultural and traditional belief system of the Igbos', in E. Nwabueze (ed.), *Chinua Achebe and convolutions of immortality reassessing the writer in relation to new realities*, pp. 202–209, CNC, Enugu.
- Onuorah, C.P. & Eze, A.U., 2024, 'Religious life of Nigerian peoples', in E.M. Onwuama, J.N.U. Ejikeme, U.F. Echeta & C.P. Onuorah (eds.), *Nigerian peoples and culture*, pp. 99–113, Great Juliet, Enugu.
- Opara, K.C., 2024, 'Community values and social cohesion: Traditional African religious practices in contemporary Nigerian society', *AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies* 18(1), 160–175.
- Opoku, K.A., 1990, 'Religious themes in West African festivals: In dialogue and alliance', *A Journal of International Religious Foundation* 4(1), 71–85.
- Oyeweso, S., 2013, 'Osun Oshogbo festival: Its origin, nature and significance for global Yoruba cultural advancement', *IACIU Journal* 2(2), 21.
- Pew Research Centre, 2012, *Religion and Public Life, table: Religious composition by country, in percentage*, viewed 12 May 2025, from <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/>.
- Probst, P., 2011, *Osogbo and the art of heritage*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Rabie, M., 2016, *Meaning of development in a theory of sustainable socio-cultural and economic development*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Saleh, M., 2022, 'Interfaith mediation centre in promoting peace in Bauchi State, Nigeria', *African Social Science and Humanities Journal* 3(4), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.57040/asshj.v3i4.299>
- Umaru, T.B., 2013, *Christian-Muslim dialogue in Northern Nigeria: A socio-political and theological consideration*, pp. 51–66, Xlibris LLC, Bloomington.
- Volf, M. & Blair, T., 2016, *Flourishing: Why we need religion in a globalized world*, Yale University Press, CT, Grand Rapids.