



ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLARISATION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN TARABA SOUTH SENATORIAL DISTRICT OF TARABA STATE, NIGERIA



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Abstract

Ethno-religious polarisation constitutes a major factor undermining peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State. This form of polarisation often generates social contradiction, mistrust, and recurrent conflicts among different ethnic and religious groups, thereby weakening intergroup relations and hindering sustainable coexistence within the region. This study aim at investigating the effects of ethnic and religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in the study area. Theoretically, the study is anchored on Social Identity Theory, which posits that belonging to social groups (e.g. religious, ethnic, political, economic or occupational groups) serves an important basis for one's identity. Methodologically, the paper is an opinion paper. It is based on desk-review using secondary sources from text-books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, internet materials etc. The criteria for selecting materials are, they should relate to ethnic and religious conflict and ethnic and religious polarisation and they should be published between 2015 and 2026. The study finds that many human societies are heterogeneous in nature, housing people with differing ethno-religious background. This difference creates contradictions which seemingly manifest in form of polarisation, ethnic and religious sentiments and communal conflicts. The findings also indicated that polarisation in Taraba South is linked to the recurrent ethno-religious and communal conflicts bedeviling the area. It is concluded that polarisation is a significant obstacle to peaceful coexistence in the area. To address the problem of ethno-religious polarisation and its attendant violent inter-group conflict, the study recommends that government should make policy that will ensure equitable and fair distribution of resources; leaders of the religious groups should condemn extremism and promote inclusive and respectful discourse; there is need for religious bodies to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding through regular interfaith meetings and discussions to foster mutual understanding and respect.

Keywords: Conflict, Ethnic, Peaceful Coexistence, Polarisation, Religion

Introduction

Human society is mostly heterogeneous, housing people with differing ethno-religious background. This difference creates contradictions which seemingly manifest in form of community polarisation, ethnic and religious sentiments and communal conflicts. As these contradictions become intractable, exerting toll on peaceful coexistence across the divides, members of a society are pitched to look out of the box with a view to finding ways of building peace amid ever growing challenges of coexistence. As societies developed, each group gradually established patterns of behaviour which have become its cultural basis. One aspect of this culture is the need for group members to understand and cooperate with one another and with other groups. Therefore, the social value of cooperation and social understanding not only among individuals but among ethnic and religious communities is necessary for the survival of the society as a unit.

Polarisation is global because it happens in developed countries like the United States and China, as well in developing countries like Albania and African countries (Huntington, 2017; United States Census Bureau, USCB, 2020). Over the course of time, factors making inroads on polarisation and disintegration in Africa have been interrogated. Differences in religious beliefs and the politicisation of religious identity, the political marginalisation of certain ethnic group are some of the critical reasons for polarisation and inter-ethnic or religious tensions in the region (Abdullahi, 2018). The Nigerian state, like many other African States, has often been compelled to deal with the issue of national integration, especially in moments of intense ethnic and religious disagreements which have sometimes degenerated into violent conflicts, with the attendant destruction and waste of both human lives and properties. The eruptions of this violence has created serious national problem that threatened the peaceful coexistence of Nigerian citizens.

In Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, ethno-religious conflicts have over the years become its characterizing feature. In 2013, ethno-religious fighting targeting civilians manifested in Wukari and its environs as well as Ibi Local Government Area and other parts of Taraba State. The deaths that followed these religious and ethnic clashes were unimaginable. The conflict worsened the level of distrust and hatred among and between the inhabitants of Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria thereby resulting to the emergence of two communities in one. The communities are polarised mostly on the basis of ethnicity and religion making peaceful coexistence difficult.

Academic work on the analysis of ethno-religious polarisation in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria is rare or possibly unavailable. Studies have been variously conducted on the incessant nature, impacts, and determinants of communal, religious, ethnic, political and ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State, Nigeria and other parts of the world (Okpanachi, 2010; Kelsey & Dukic, 2023; Idahosa & Akov, 2013), but there is hardly a known study from the available literature that focus in understanding ethno-religious polarisation and peaceful coexistence particularly in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria. It is based on this backdrop; this study investigated the effects of ethno-religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to investigate the nexus between ethno-religious polarisation and peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

1. To ascertain the effects of ethnic polarisation on peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria
2. To examine the effects of religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba State, Nigeria

Literature Review

Conceptualising Polarisation and its Impact on Coexistence

Polarisation denotes the divergence of opinions toward opposing ideological extremes, functioning simultaneously as a temporal process and a static state of social stratification. Beyond ideological variance, it can be conceptualized as a behavioral phenomenon wherein group members converge around specific collective actions (Kelsey & Dukic, 2023). Fundamentally, polarisation concerns the distribution of beliefs and stances within or across public discourses (Baden, 2015); it is inherently relational, as a singular position cannot be "polarised" in isolation. This phenomenon exacerbates social cleavages along identity lines, fostering antagonistic attitudes and diminishing intergroup interaction. When left unmitigated, it fundamentally undermines peaceful coexistence by precipitating segregation, systemic mistrust, social exclusion, and the eventual breakdown of institutional frameworks.

Polarisation further drives spatial and social fragmentation as individuals self-select into homogeneous enclaves to mitigate perceived external threats. Nagatani and Tochiara (2017) contend that the intersection of conformity pressure and voluntary migration under polarised conditions produces sequestered communities that reinforce extremist ideologies and deepen societal divisions. Ugwu (2019) observes that in historically divided urban centers such as Belfast, Jos, Kaduna, and Wukari, spatial segregation may initially attenuate overt violence by separating rivals; however, it simultaneously formalizes group boundaries and entrenches exclusionary narratives that sustain long-term hostility. Corvalan and Vargas (2015) identify mistrust as a primary mechanism through which segregation escalates conflict. In contexts characterized by ethnic and religious polarisation, mutual suspicion intensifies as minority groups perceive the majority as a threat to their existential security, leading to a collapse in functional cooperation.

Furthermore, polarisation erodes confidence in democratic institutions—a critical precursor to democratic backsliding and political violence. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) characterize “pernicious polarisation” as a process where political competition shifts from policy-based disagreement to identity-based antagonism, thereby weakening state capacity and the rule of law. When institutions are perceived as being captured by a dominant faction, their legitimacy dissolves, prompting marginalized groups to resort to parallel governance structures or self-protection, which further fragments the state.

Ethnic Polarisation and Peaceful Coexistence

Peaceful coexistence is defined by Kelman (2018) as a state of harmonious, non-violent relations between diverse groups, characterised by mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation, and sustained by inclusive institutions and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Consequently,

achieving such a state requires the deliberate construction of societal frameworks that enhance intergroup understanding. However, within the Nigerian context, Idahosa and Akov (2013) argued that this ideal is increasingly elusive, the Nigerian society has become progressively polarised as political and economic marginalisation are increasingly framed through religious and ethnic lenses. Onyekwere (2025) further assert that ethnic polarisation inhibits political stability and prevents the crystallisation of a cohesive national identity. This fragmentation also impedes the design of structural policies; La Porta et al. (1999) note that ethnic diversity can lead to systemic corruption and administrative inefficiency when governments prioritise the interests of dominant ethnic coalitions.

Nnoli (1978) defines ethnicity through the lens of a common consciousness in relation to "other" ethnic groups, viewing it as a socio-political phenomenon arising from the interactions of diverse groups with distinct values. In this context, groups become "entities for themselves," often adopting ethnocentric perspectives that view outsiders as rivals. This accelerates distrust and complicates the prospects for coexistence. Ethnic polarisation, therefore, represents the division of populations into tribal or linguistic sub-units, each viewing itself as a unique entity distinct from, and often opposed to, those outside its immediate identity marker.

Religious Polarisation and Peaceful Coexistence

Defining "religion" remains a complex scholarly endeavor. Lebens (2022) characterises it as a system of ideas and practices demanding a specific form of religiosity, while Miles (2016) defines it as a code of moral conduct and ritual practice involving the recognition of a superhuman power. Religious identity serves as a primary lens through which individuals perceive themselves and others, significantly influencing social interactions and attitudes. This identity often bifurcates society into "in-group" and "out-group" categories, fostering segregation. As noted by Haidt (cited in Miles, 2016), individuals within religious communities are embedded in normative frameworks and institutions that shape their subsequent reasoning and social behavior. While religion can foster social cohesion, it can also function as a destabilising force. Religious sentiment often dictates political affiliation; for instance, in the United States, the theological conservatism of many Republicans contrasts with the diverse religious or secular profiles of Democrats, a divergence that contributes to ongoing socio-political conflict (Mehdi & Siddiqui, 2019).

In Nigeria, religion has long been a central axis of social and political life (Enwerem, 1995). The salience of religious identity is exceptionally high; a 2006 Pew Forum survey indicated that 76% of Nigerian Christians and 91% of Nigerian Muslims prioritized their religious affiliation over national or ethnic identities (Pew Research Center, 2006). Consequently, the Christian-Muslim divide represents the primary axis of religious differentiation in the country (Okpanachi, 2010). Nevertheless, the relationship between ethnicity and religion is not strictly linear. Cox, Orsborn, and Sisk (2015) argue that Nigeria's extensive ethnic plurality can occasionally mitigate religious polarisation, particularly when ethnic interests do not align perfectly with religious cleavages, thereby creating a more complex structural landscape for coexistence.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Ethno-religious conflict constitutes a formidable impediment to Nigeria's political stability, national integration, and socio-economic trajectory. This phenomenon encompasses violent confrontations precipitated by the convergence of ethnic and religious identities, variables

frequently instrumentalised by political elites to secure parochial economic and political advantages. Within the Nigerian context, these conflicts are structurally rooted in colonial legacies, the inequitable distribution of state resources, identity politics, the contentious "indigene-settler" dichotomy, and pervasive religious intolerance.

A seminal case study of this intersectionality is the Jos crisis in Plateau State, which is characterized by recurrent volatility between predominantly Christian "indigene" populations and Muslim "settler" communities. Idahosa and Akov (2013) posit that these hostilities are sustained by protracted disputes regarding citizenship rights, political representation, and equitable access to economic opportunities. Furthermore, the authors underscore that institutional fragility and suboptimal governmental interventions have facilitated the persistence of this cyclical violence.

A further dimension of ethno-religious volatility is observed in the farmer-herder crisis, primarily involving Muslim Fulani pastoralists and predominantly Christian agrarian communities in North-Central Nigeria. Recent empirical inquiries suggest that these conflicts, while initially triggered by competition over land and ecological resources have mutated into identity-based violence influenced by profound ethnic and religious sentiments. Nlewem and Akhagba (2024) argue that elite manipulation and "eco-violence" have effectively transformed resource-based competition into deeply entrenched ethno-religious confrontations. Akinola (2017) observes that ethnic friction often stems from the systemic mismanagement of differences inherent in Nigeria's post-colonial configuration. The potential for systemic conflict was arguably latent within the contradictions of ethnicity, religion, and culture aggregated during the colonial era. Consequently, the disparity in population and political leverage has bifurcated the Nigerian populace into dominant majority and marginalized minority ethnic cohorts.

The demographic configuration of Nigeria reinforces these cleavages: the Hausa-Fulani and other northern ethnic groups are predominantly Muslim, whereas the South-South minorities and the Igbo populations of the Southeast are largely Christian. The "Middle Belt" (North-Central zone) presents a heterogeneous religious demographic, while the Yoruba of the Southwest maintain a relatively balanced distribution between the two faiths. This spatial distribution reinforces a North-South binary, associating the North with Islam and the South with Christianity thereby intensifying ethnic fragmentation. As Paden (2007) asserts, the salience of Islamic identity often eclipses alternative identity markers, rendering religious affiliation a primary driver of ethnic differentiation. Such structural divisions have significantly eroded social capital and intercommunal trust, posing a sustained threat to Nigeria's viability as a cohesive sovereign entity.

Conflicts and Identity Politics in Taraba South

Conflict is the struggle, competition or confrontation that takes place at different levels. It happens at interpersonal level, which is between individuals, or at group level, which occurs between communities, or at interstate level, which takes place between nations. Ethnic identity is the basis of identity politics. Like ethnic identity, identity politics is conceptualised not as a fixed, primordial attribute but as a dynamic and politically salient social construct (Jamri, 2026). While it encompasses shared cultural markers such as language, history, and territorial origin (Smith, 2007), its significance in the political arena is largely instrumental. It is struggle for power for the advantage of group's ethnic or religious identities. This perspective posits that

ethnic or religious identities are often mobilised, manipulated, and politicised by elites in their competition for power and resources.

In the Nigerian context, ethnic identity transcends cultural expression to become a fundamental political currency. The identities of the three major groups (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo) as well as those of numerous minority groups, are activated during political contests to forge solidarity, justify claims to state power, and allocate resources (Jamri, 2026). Therefore, for this study, ethnic identity is defined as a fluid and politically activated sense of group belonging that is strategically utilised as a resource for mobilisation and competition within the political sphere.

The case of ethno-religious conflicts of the Jukun/Tiv, Kuteb/ Chamba, and Hausa/Jukun groups, alongside ongoing farmer-herder clashes with the Fulani, represent a clear empirical manifestation of identity politics in the Taraba South Senatorial District. According to Lenshie and Agbu (2013) in the Local Governments like Wukari, Takum and Donga, sub-national and ethnic belonging operates as the primary currency for political mobilisation and group alignment. Odigbo (2018) posit that identity politics is actively instrumentalised by political elites to consolidate hegemony over electoral seats and monopolise state resource allocation. Moti (2019) contends that rather than emerging purely from primordial hatred, these conflicts are continuously reproduced because of ethno-religious identity serve as highly effective tool for securing political representation and land-based economic advantages.

Political actors according to Adebisi and Aliu (2020) systematically deploy divide-and-rule tactics to fracture the electorate along religious and ethnic fault lines. Ahmadu (2026) maintained that, during the past electoral cycles, strategic labeling has been used to frame specific opposition coalitions such as the All Progressive Congress (APC) strictly as “Islamic party” to trigger collective anxiety and consolidate the Christian voter base.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Social Identity Theory. The theory was propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1986), they posit that belonging to social groups (e.g. religious, ethnic, political, economic or occupational groups) serves an important basis for one's identity. Membership in a group(s), as well as one's value and emotional significance attached to this membership, is an important part of one's self-concept. One of the earliest statements of social identity was made by Kurt Lewin who emphasized that individuals need a firm sense of group identification in order to maintain a sense of well-being (Lewin, 1948). According to this theory, every individual divides his/her social world into distinct classes or so-called social categories (polarisation) and locate themselves and others in relation to them. On the basis of a cumulative process of locating oneself, individuals can constitute their social identity, i.e., defines themselves in social category such as ethnic, religious, political economic and indigene-settler groups etc. The basic assumption is that people strive for a positive social identity.

Relating social identity theory to ethno-religious polarisation and peaceful coexistence in the study area, it is clear that all the members of the polarised communities are always striving to maintain a positive sense of self by ensuring that the group they belong is doing better than their out group. When effort to have a positive sense of self become difficult through their divide, simply may be because of marginalisation or oppression, they can strive to reject their disadvantaged position by confronting the dominating group. This is typical of the relationship between the polarised communities in the study area (Taraba South Senatorial District).

However, social identity theory is criticized to be too simplistic and restrictive in its analysis of human behaviour and actions. In this context, social identity may not be a sole cause of conflict between groups. This is because conflict is often generated by struggle for scarce resources. Politics and land are some of these resources. There are cases in which Muslim and Hausa/Fulani unite with Christians and Jukuns in political struggle against their Hausa/Fulani brothers on political interest. Tajfel and Turner (1986) further argued that social identity results only from class identity, which in itself is founded on economic structure. Identities are in most cases functions of class interests in which individuals are therefore divided on the basis of economic opportunities and positions which they occupy in the society. According to this, therefore, relations between groups does not result into conflict and differences in group identities alone, unless if such arise from enmity based on structural differences and socio-economic inequality among the various classes in a community.

The theory is applicable to the problem under study because if we look at the incessant ethnic contention between Tiv and Jukun in Wukari on one hand and between Hausa and Jukun on the other hand, issue of ethno-religious identity and polarisation by implication, is playing significant role in the conflict. In other words, ethno-religious polarisation is a trigger for violent confrontation between polarised groups in the area, making peaceful coexistence difficult.

Methodology

The paper is an opinion paper. Desk review is therefore adopted using secondary sources from text-books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, internet materials, official documents related ethnic and religious conflict and on ethnic and religious polarisation from development agencies like United States Census Bureau (USCB). There was also search method from Googlescholar and ResearchGate of subjects like the effects of ethnic polarisation on peaceful coexistence and the effects of religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. The inclusion method is the subject as mentioned above and the year scope is from 2015 to 2026, any material that deals with subject area outside ethnic polarisation, religious polarisation and peaceful coexistence is excluded. The researcher has taken into account some ethical considerations like using maximum of 300 words from a secondary material, proper citations and acknowledgement of sources, avoidance of inciteful opinions or attack on personalities, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the extent to which ethnic and religious polarisation undermines peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District, Taraba State, Nigeria. The analysis offers a critical account of how ethno-religious divisions impede social cohesion within Nigeria's pluralistic context. Taraba South Senatorial District is characterised by substantial ethno-religious diversity. Pronounced polarisation in the area generates perceptions of domination and marginalisation, whereby minority groups interpret the actions of majority groups as threats to their security and well-being. Such perceptions foster mutual suspicion, erode intergroup trust, and reinforce patterns of segregation, exclusion, and perceived injustice in social and political relations. Consequently, ethno-religious tensions persist and frequently escalate into conflict. The study therefore concludes that ethno-religious polarisation exerts a significant negative effect on peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated action by all stakeholders, as outlined in the recommendations that follow.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to mitigate the effects of ethnic and religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in Taraba South Senatorial District of Taraba

State, Nigeria. On the problem of ethnic polarisation, Federal Government should formulate and implement policies that ensure equitable and fair distribution of resources, so that no individual or community is favoured on the basis of class or social category. Community leaders and the local authority should invest more in promoting inter-ethnic cooperation through economic collaboration and in supporting initiatives that bring people together across ethnic lines. Institutions and governance structures should be strengthened to ensure that they are inclusive, representative, and accountable to all ethnic groups. Civil society organisations and initiatives that promote inter-ethnic understanding, tolerance, and cooperation should also be supported.

To mitigate the effects of religious polarisation on peaceful coexistence in the study area, state and local authorities should make policies that support and amplify moderate voices within each religious community. Religious leaders like Imams and Pastors should be encouraged to condemn extremism and to promote inclusive and respectful discourse. Government should create a level playground for religious bodies to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding through regular meetings and discussions that foster mutual respect. In addition, a sense of shared national identity that transcends religious differences should be promoted. If implemented, these measures are likely to reduce polarisation and enhance peaceful coexistence among the religiously divided communities in Taraba South Senatorial District, Taraba State, Nigeria.

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