Religious Diversity and Conflict in Nigeria: Identity Formation and Economic Development

By

Damilola Adepeju-Fashina

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Chair: Mehrangiz Najafizadeh, Ph.D.

Brian Donovan, Ph.D.

David Smith, Ph.D.

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The thesis committee for Damilola Adepeju-Fashina certifies that
this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chair: Mehrangiz Najafizadeh, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Some scholarly works have established a link between *religious diversity* and *conflict*, indicating that the more religiously diverse a country is, the higher the likelihood of conflict. But the case of religiously diverse Nigeria proves the contrary. Though Nigeria is religiously diverse and experiences conflict, the conflict is only restricted to one region (the north), while other parts of the country (the south) are conflict-free. What explains this variation in conflict within the same country? Previous scholarship has pointed to factors like Islam, religious conservatism, religious dominance, and socioeconomic and political factors as reasons for this variation. However, these studies are insufficient because they focus on the proximate causes of the conflict and do not provide historical analysis and nuance, which I argue is central to understanding the presence of conflict in the north and its absence in the south. Using historical and regional comparative approaches, I argue that this variation in conflict can be explained by different historical experiences tied to identity formation and unequal economic development created by colonialism, which placed northern Nigeria in an economically disadvantaged position compared to southern Nigeria, leading to extreme poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and poor infrastructure which increase *grievances* and explain why the north experiences violence than the rest of the country.

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Being a religiously diverse country, Nigeria has been the focus of scholarship on the link between religious diversity and conflict. With a population comprising an almost equal number of Christians and Muslims (90 million Muslims and 87 million Christians)[1], scholars have attempted to understand how this diversity contributes to conflict. But the conflict in Nigeria is only restricted to the north[2], while other parts of the country (the south) are relatively conflict-free. In 2021, the United Nations Development Programme reported that some 350,000 people had died from the Boko Haram insurgency within the last 12 years in northern Nigeria (northeastern Nigeria alone) (Al Jazeera 2021). Therefore, what explains the presence of conflict in this region (northern Nigeria) and the absence of conflict in the other region (southern Nigeria)? Why, for instance, is Ibadan (southern Nigeria) relatively peaceful while Kaduna (northern Nigeria) experiences violence? Some scholars have pointed to Islam as a factor because northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, and Islam is said to be the cause of violence (see Toft 2007). Others have focused on the degree of conservatism of northern Muslims, suggesting that they are more intolerant compared to southern Muslims (see Peel 2016). Yet, other views contend that religious dominance by Muslims over Christians in the north is the answer to this question (Dowd 2016). But equally emphasized is the role of sociopolitical and economic conditions (weak governance, favorable geographic terrain for conflict, and foreign

[1] Diamant (2019); also see the Appendix for Nigeria's religious composition (Figure 2)

[2] I only use *northern* and *southern* Nigeria in this study for analysis. Nigeria has a much more complex geography than these two dichotomies. The country is divided into six geopolitical zones (see Figure 1), which cut across different ethnic and religious identities. In the north are northwest, northeast, and north central zones, while the south comprises the southwest, southeast, and south-south zones.

armed groups and government support) that make conflict possible in the north compared to the rest of the country (Fearon and Laitin 2003). While these views are diverse, they focus on the immediate causes[3] of the conflict in the north and are insufficient because they do not provide historical analysis and nuance, which is significant to understanding the root causes of the conflict in northern Nigeria. Using historical and regional comparative approaches, I link this regional variation in conflict occurrence to two events in Nigerian history: identity formation and economic development. I trace the creation of ethnoreligious, politico-religious identities and economic development across the country and argue that the salience of Islam in northern Nigeria, which overlaps with the ethnic and political identities of northern Muslims, explains the "religious" nature of conflict in that region. More importantly, unequal economic development created by *colonialism* (through commerce, trade, education, and infrastructure) placed northern Nigeria at the bottom rung of the country's ladder compared to southern Nigeria, leading to what I call *isolation* of the north and *integration* of the south. Further, the persistence of extreme poverty, poor political leadership, unemployment, illiteracy, and poor infrastructure in postcolonial north has contributed to increased grievances and explains why this region experiences conflict more than the rest of the country.

This study is organized as follows. Section 1 sets the context for the study by providing the key terms used in the research and my conceptualization of the key terms. In Section 2, I review the literature, focusing on the present research question: What explains the presence of conflict in northern Nigeria and the absence of conflict in southern Nigeria? Section 3 provides a historical analysis from precolonial Nigeria to postcolonial Nigeria, emphasizing the role of

[3] Immediate (or proximate) causes of conflict are what we see on the surface as opposed to the root causes, and they are also more recent reasons for conflict. Root causes are long-term, systemic, and embedded in the structures of society (Herbert 2017).

identity formation and unequal economic development caused by colonialism and contributing to the presence of conflict in northern Nigeria. In Section 4, I provide an overview and conclusion to the study.

Key Terms

Religion

In this study, I utilize Toft's (2007) definition of religion as

> a belief in a supernatural being (or beings); prayers and communication with that being; transcendent realities that might include some form of heaven, paradise, or hell; a distinction between the sacred and the profane and between ritual acts and sacred objects; a view that explains both the world as a whole and a person's proper role in it; a code of conduct in line with that worldview; and a community bound by its adherence to these elements. (P. 99)

Religious Diversity

Religious diversity is defined using Montalvo and Reynal-Querol's (2003) Religious Polarization Index (RPI), which measures religious diversity using the number of religious groups in a country and if they view themselves as a potential threat to each other. The threat of conflict is higher if one group's size is more relative to the other group. Nigeria is religiously diverse because it has two major religious groups almost equal in size (90 million Muslims and 87 million Christians) (Diamant 2019).

Religious Identity

Religious identity, like many other forms of identities, is how individuals differentiate themselves from "others" and, at the same time, identify themselves with groups they think share similar religious beliefs in creating a sense of self and subjectivity (Werbner 2010). These beliefs often involve differentiating between "human and sacred worlds, person and God, sacred and

profane" (Werbner 2010:233). Religious identity can take different non-mutually-exclusive forms. According to Peek (2005), it can be *ascribed*, *chosen*, or *declared*. *Ascribed* religious identity is one of the most common forms, as many adherents of religion develop a religious identity from being born into a religious family or group. A *chosen* religious identity develops as individuals grow and decide whether they want to follow a particular religion or another. Religious identity is *declared* when it is reinforced due to an event or crisis. For instance, Peek (2005) shows that after the 9/11 attacks, though many Muslims were religiously profiled and discriminated against, the events also strengthened their religious identity. For my study, all these forms of religious identity are present among northern and southern Nigerian Muslims. However, religious identity formation in the north is stronger compared to the south because of various historical, sociopolitical, and economic reasons, which will be explored in this study.

Economic Development

Economic development may mean different things based on different contexts. In this study, by "economic development," I mean the unintended *developmental* effects of colonial policies in Nigeria during colonial rule. These policies focused mainly on education, the introduction of English language, and the development of infrastructure, which were better developed in the south than in the north.

Conflict

I define conflict using two indicators – group contestation and violence. A conflict would involve groups making demands over issues of interest and using violence as an instrument.

Religious Conflict

I define a religious conflict following Toft (2007) as a conflict in which religion is the subject of the conflict. For example, the institutionalization of Islamic law (Sharia) in northern

Nigeria was not well received by the Christian community in the region and has caused conflict. I also consider a conflict in which religion is marginal as a religious conflict, as evident in the farmer-pastoralist conflict in northern Nigeria, which is not centrally a "religious" conflict because it focuses on contestation over access to scarce resources (land, water) between farmers and herders. However, it is often seen as a religious conflict because farmers are usually Christians and pastoralists are Muslims.

Conflict in northern Nigeria

I categorize the conflict in northern Nigeria into three forms, most of which are considered religious conflicts. The first category of conflict in northern Nigeria is between the predominant Muslims and the minority Christians. The predominant Muslims belong to the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. But there are also some Hausa-Fulani Christian converts in Zaria, Kaduna. Other minority Christian groups are non-Hausa in the Middle Belt of the country (Mustapha and Ehrhardt 2018). One of the earliest conflicts between the predominant Muslims and the minority Christians was the 1982 burning of a church in Kano because it was said to be built near a mosque (Albert 2013). The second category of conflict is the internal conflict within the Muslim community in northern Nigeria, between radical "reformers," like Boko Haram, and those that are moderate. The final category of conflict in northern Nigeria is the farmer-pastoralist conflict on issues of access to land and water. This conflict has a religious undertone, with most pastoralists being Muslims and farmers being Christians. It is important to note that I have categorized these conflicts only for ease of understanding. Sometimes, they are not necessarily separate but entangled. For example, extremist groups like Boko Haram have targeted both Christian and Muslim populations. Hence, in this case, we cannot disentangle a Muslim-Christian conflict from a Muslim-Muslim conflict.

Northern Nigeria

The term *northern Nigeria* is used to refer to the 19 states (including the Federal Capital Territory [FCT]) of the 36 states of Nigeria. But the region is far from homogeneous, with ethnic and religious differences. Though northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, there is a significant minority of Christian groups in the region. According to the last census (in 1963) that includes religious data, Muslims are about 72%, while Christians are about 10% of the northern population. There are also adherents of traditional religions, constituting about 19% of the population (Ehrhardt and Ibrahim 2018). Though the census data were collected more than five decades ago, they still mainly represent the religious distribution in the region today. Conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the north are common, owing to the desire for representation by minority Christian groups and their rejection of Sharia law (Islamic law) in areas with a Christian population. Christians in the north are also concerned about discrimination and violence against them by the Boko Haram extremist group. The main concern for many Muslims in the north is the association of northern Christians with Christians in the south, therefore they make every effort to prevent general Christian domination in the north (Mustapha, Ehrhardt, and Diprose 2018).

Despite a predominantly Muslim population, Muslims in the north are divided along sectarian lines. This division is mainly between the majority Sunni population and other groups within the non-Sunni sects (for example, the Shias and Ahmadiyyas). But there is also division within the Sunni sect, with some identifying as Sufis, Mahdists, or Salafis. One of the central dividing issues among all the sects is the degree of conservatism within Islam (Ostien 2018).

The Hausa[4] are the largest ethnic group in the north, with 30% of the northern population. However, other relatively large groups in the region are the Fulani (6%), Kanuri/Berberi (2.4%), and the Tiv (2.4%) (in the Middle Belt) (Central Intelligence Agency 2022).

Historically, the mainstay of Nigeria's economy has been agriculture, with northern Nigeria producing agricultural products for domestic and international consumption. For instance, groundnut was a central export from northern Nigeria during the colonial period (Falola and Heaton 2008). Today, the north still produces agricultural products for domestic use, and the north's pastoral economy provides the bulk of the beef for Nigeria. With the discovery of oil in the 1970s, however, petroleum exports became the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, and though many Nigerians still depend on agriculture as a means of livelihood, it only contributes 21.1% to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Central Intelligence Agency 2022).

In Nigeria, the "north" is almost synonymous with violence and conflict because of complex ethnoreligious tensions. It is also the region experiencing what Hoffmann (2014:5) calls the "worst human development indicators in the world," with extreme poverty in some parts of the north, high levels of unemployment, low literacy levels (especially for girls), corruption, and bad governance. In 2019, Sokoto, Taraba, and Jigawa, all northern states, were the poorest in the country (National Bureau of Statistics 2019; see also Figure 3 in the Appendix). And the region has a lower literacy level than southern Nigeria, with 38% (in the northwest) for women and 53.1% (in the northeast) for men, compared to the south, where women's literacy is at 95.4% (in the southeast), and that of men is at 95% (in the south-south) (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] and United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] 2017; see also Figure 4 in the Appendix). Further, between June and August 2022, it was estimated that about 19.45 million people in the

[4] The Hausa are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Others are Yoruba and Igbo in southern Nigeria. Apart from these three groups, Nigeria has over 250 other ethnic groups.

north needed food assistance, and more than 3 million people are internally displaced due to instability and insecurity (Central Intelligence Agency 2022).

Southern Nigeria

Like northern Nigeria, southern Nigeria is also diverse along ethnic and religious lines. But unlike the north, with a predominantly Muslim population, southern Nigeria comprises Muslims, mainly among the Yoruba in the southwest, and a predominantly Christian community among different ethnic groups in the southeast and south-south. About a third of the Yoruba are Muslims, while others are Christians and traditionalists (Falola and Heaton 2008). The Yoruba and Igbo are the predominant ethnic groups in the region, comprising 15.5% and 15.2% of the southern population, respectively (Central Intelligence Agency 2022). Other significant minority ethnic groups are the Ibibio and Ijaw/Izon, both comprising 1.8% of the southern population (Central Intelligence Agency 2022).

Southern Nigeria contributes *substantially* to the Nigerian economy. Because of its proximity to coastal areas (unlike the north with no coastline), it was a hub for international trade during the colonial period. For instance, cocoa and palm oil were significant export products in the southwest and southeast, respectively, during this period (Falola and Heaton 2008). Also, Nigeria is highly dependent on oil, which is produced in the Niger Delta in the south-south. In 2019, the petroleum sector was 5.8% of the country's real GDP and accounted for 95% of its foreign exchange earnings and 80% of its budget revenues (Nwuke 2021). Further, Lagos referred to as the "economic powerhouse" of Nigeria, is in the south. Donnelly (2012) notes that Lagos accounts for more than 60% of Nigeria's economic activities in industrialization and commercialization.

Unlike the north, where ethnoreligious conflicts are rife, conflicts are rare occurrences in the south, except for the conflicts in the Niger Delta (south-south of Nigeria), an oil-rich region and the backbone of Nigeria's economy. The source of conflict is primarily tension between minority ethnic groups and foreign oil corporations operating in the region. This tension mainly centers on exploitation and environmental destruction from the activities of multinational corporations.

To be sure, and as previously noted, southern Nigeria is not homogeneous ethnically and religiously. However, people of different identities coexist peacefully in the south compared to the north. For example, Muslims among the Yoruba and Christians from other ethnic groups live and interact economically and politically with little or no contestation or conflict. Within the Christian community are different denominations (Catholics, Evangelicals, Pentecostals) and sub-denominations (within Pentecostals, there are the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners' Chapel, and Deeper Life Church) that coexist without any conflict.

Given this background, in the following sections, I set the socio-historical contexts for the analysis of conflict in northern Nigeria in comparison with southern Nigeria from the precolonial period to the present. I argue that the regional variation in conflict is primarily due to different historical experiences between the two regions tied to identity formation and uneven economic development going back to British colonial policies.

SECTION 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why northern Nigeria Experiences Conflict

Attempts in the literature to understand why northern Nigeria experiences conflict can be divided into two categories – studies that focus solely on northern Nigeria and those that compare northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria, explaining the presence of conflict in the north and its absence in the south. Below, I review these studies and show that they are significant but insufficient in helping us understand the nature of conflict in northern Nigeria.

Focus on northern Nigeria

What explains the presence of conflict in northern Nigeria and its absence in southern Nigeria? Many scholars answer this question by focusing on the Boko Haram extremist group in northern Nigeria and its contribution to conflict in the north. For example, Loimeier (2012) examines the historical emergence of Boko Haram and contends that social, political, and generational factors explain the origin of the group in northern Nigeria. Like Loimeier (2012), Hansen (2017:551) also focuses on Boko Haram and argues that the group's emergence can be understood "as a reaction to more than a half century of corruption, venality, poverty, and abuse by the state predator class." Uzodike and Maiangwa (2012:91) point to similar factors such as "bad governance in Nigeria, including the widespread failures of state policies, inefficient and wasteful parastatals, and endemic corruption, poverty, unemployment, and extensive underdevelopment." For Sodipo (2013), Boko Haram and other radical groups in the north contribute to conflict in northern Nigeria through their radicalization of young people. Alozieuwa (2012) favors a political argument for the activities of Boko Haram in the north. He argues that the fear of political domination from the south by radical groups in the north explains

the severity of the conflict from Boko Haram activities in the north. Aghedo and Osumah (2014) focus on the role of the state in explaining Boko Haram insurgency in the north. For the authors, poor governance and state repression through military activities have further radicalized the group and contributed to conflict in northern Nigeria. Finally, Thurston (2016:5) disagrees with an economic deprivation, political marginalization, and foreign support (Boko Haram's affiliation with foreign radical groups like Al- Qaeda) explanation for Boko Haram and argues that the group's violence in northern Nigeria is due to "the combination of exclusivism and grievance." According to the author, "Boko Haram presents itself as the victim of state aggression and the voice for a larger, and aggrieved, Muslim constituency" (Thurston 2016:17) and hence claims "to represent true Islam, and grievances against the state and non-members of the sect" (Thurston 2016:28).

Overall, these studies are beneficial in understanding Boko Haram's contribution to the conflict in the north. However, Boko Haram is a proximate cause of the conflict, not a root cause. We need to investigate the underlying causes of the conflict, which history makes possible. Also, Boko Haram terrorism forms only one dimension of the multidimensional conflict in the region. I have previously noted that conflict and tension also occur between Muslims and Christians, within the Muslim population, and between groups like farmers and pastoralists in the region. Hence focusing on Boko Haram alone prevents us from having a broader and deeper understanding of different forms of conflict in the region.

Other studies have examined the conflict between farmers and pastoralists, religious extremism, and the informal economy in the north. For example, on the farmer-pastoralist conflict, Eke (2020:748) argues that while "Much of the research on herder-farmer conflicts … shows that competition over land use is at the heart of the problem," the subjective perception of

pastoralists as savages (violent and dangerous) contributes to the escalation of conflict in the north.

Furthermore, Onakuse and Jatula's (2021) analysis explores the conflict in the north through the lens of religious extremism. They argue that violence in the region can be attributed to "anti-southern sentiments in the north, complicated by religious, cultural, and economic suspicions, whipped up at political intersections." They also point to leadership failure as a cause of conflict in northern Nigeria.

Finally, Meagher (2013) examines whether the informal economy exacerbates or reduces conflict occurrence in northern Nigeria. Using Kaduna and Kano as case studies, she concludes that the informal economy contributes to de-escalating conflict than contributing to it due to the nature of the informal institutions in Kano and Kaduna, specifically, because they "foster cooperative relations across the religious divide" (Meagher 2013:18).

While some of these analyses overlap with my arguments in this study, they are insufficient because they look at the conflict only from a "northern Nigeria perspective," where the source of the conflict is attributed to factors within the north alone. I suggest that using this perspective prevents a holistic view and understanding of the conflict, and a comparison with the south instead presents us with the opportunity to understand why two regions within the same country have different outcomes regarding conflict.

Comparing northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria

Some scholars have used a different approach, comparing northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria instead of focusing on the north alone and questioning why conflict is prevalent in the north and absent in the south. These scholars explain conflict in the north using the "Islam as inherently violent" conceptualization. Because northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, some

scholars have pointed out this factor as the reason for conflict in that region (and an absence of conflict in the south, which is not predominantly Muslim). Scholars working on religion and conflict have examined the relationship between Islam and violence and have found mixed results. For example, Toft (2007) finds that from 1940 to 2000, Islam had the highest presence in civil wars (81 percent) through incumbent governments and rebels than Christianity (50 percent) or Hinduism (16 percent). The causal explanation is the link between Islam and the struggle for political authority, the closeness of holy sites in Islam to Israel and large oil reserves, and the concept of *jihad*[5], which is subject to different interpretations by those who use it for violence (Toft 2007). But Fish, Jensenius, and Michel (2010) find no link between being a Muslim and being violent. However, in line with Toft (2007), their conclusions indicate that "Islamists do bear some responsibility for major episodes of political violence in the postwar world but that some other actors have been responsible for as much large-scale political violence as Islamists have" (Fish et al. 2010:1342). In Karakaya's (2015) study, after controlling for socioeconomic and political factors, the effect of Islam disappears. Hence, concluding that the presence of religion in a country does not necessarily make it violent-prone.

Despite these conflicting findings, if we assume that Islam plays a role in the violent conflict in northern Nigeria, we are faced with another puzzling question: There are Muslims across other regions in Nigeria, but we do not see any conflict in those regions. Muslims in northern Nigeria are ethnically Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri. But there are also Muslims among the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria, and this region is relatively peaceful. This makes a simple Islam-conflict nexus unfit for our understanding of conflict occurrence in northern Nigeria.

[5] *Jihad* has been interpreted in different ways, but the dominant interpretation is often "violence." However, its literal meaning from the Quran is "struggle," or "striving." For a detailed discussion of *jihad*, see Afsaruddin (2020) and Toft (2007).

If we do not find support for the Islam-violence link, another explanation that has often been provided for conflict in northern Nigeria is that though there are Muslims among the Yoruba, the reason we do not see violence in southwestern Nigeria is that the Yoruba are culturally tolerant while northern Muslims are not. Peel (2016) provides this explanation in his book *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion*, where he argues that

> In Yorubaland, Islam and Christianity, although rivals, coexist peaceably within a framework of shared community values, in marked contrast to the situation in Northern Nigeria, where a jihadist tradition has contributed to a pattern of endemic religious violence whose most recent manifestation is the militant Islamist organization known as Boko Haram. (P. 2)

There are two explanations for this variation, according to Peel (2016):

> The first is sociological: the crosscutting of communal and religious ties (universal in Yorubaland, much rarer in the North), which greatly raises the cost of religious violence and so reduces its incidence. The second is cultural: the virtual absence from Yorubaland of a jihadist tradition, such as had such has a strong presence within Northern Islam. (P. 12)

This argument is weak because there is evidence that Muslims from the north living in the south coexist with other ethnic and religious groups. An example is the coexistence of the Yoruba and Hausa community in Mile 12, Lagos. Even though there have been incidences of conflict between the two groups in Mile 12, the level of conflict is nothing compared to that of northern Nigeria. Moreover, community groups and associations have successfully managed the conflict (Animasawun 2016).

A counterargument to this could be that the absence of serious violence in Mile 12 is because Muslims from the north are a minority in this area, hence preventing them from being

able to mobilize for intense conflict. Nevertheless, the fact that they coexist with other groups in other parts of the country weakens the intolerance-conflict link as we do not see a large scale of violence in other places where Muslims from the north reside.

Religious dominance is another reason given for conflict in northern Nigeria. According to Dowd (2016), dominant religious groups could be threatening minority religious groups and can increase the likelihood of conflict. In his study on religious diversity and religious tolerance in Nigeria, Dowd (2016) finds that in religiously diverse Ibadan (southwestern Nigeria), with almost equal size of religious groups, religious groups were more tolerant of one another than in Enugu (southeastern Nigeria), where Christians predominate and Kano (northern Nigeria) where Muslims predominate. Dowd (2016) suggests that these findings can help us understand why religiously homogenous areas are likely to experience conflict compared to religiously diverse areas. However, the study does not explain why other less diverse and segregated religious communities in Nigeria (for instance, Ede in Osun state) have remained relatively conflict-free, despite being religiously homogenous.

Finally, Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that conditions that make conflict possible (weak state, foreign support for insurgency, favorable geographic terrain for conflict) are better predictors of insurgency and civil war than factors that focus on grievances (economic inequality, deprivation, marginalization). They contend that "Surely ethnic antagonisms, nationalist sentiments, and grievances often motivate rebels and their supporters. But such broad factors are too common to distinguish the cases where civil war breaks out" (Fearon and Laitin 2003:76). According to the authors, grievances are important as motivators of conflict but cannot by themselves cause conflict without supporting factors like a weak state, foreign support, and a large population. In their study, the authors focus on insurgency and civil wars. While factors

influencing conflict (for example, weak state) are central to understanding large-scale conflicts like the Boko Haram insurgency in the north, grievances alone (for example, deprivation) can lead to smaller-scale conflicts like communal conflicts. For instance, in a small-scale conflict like the farmer-pastoralist conflict in northern Nigeria, the conditions that the authors mentioned that gave rise to conflict (for example, foreign support for insurgency), are not largely present, but grievances still led to conflict. In this type of conflict, there were instances of pastoralists and farmers attacking each other due to farmers' complaints about pastoralists' animals grazing on their farms and pastoralists accusing farmers of attacking them and rustling their cattle (Amnesty International 2018).

While these various studies contribute to our understanding of conflict in northern Nigeria, they focus on proximate causes (Boko Haram, religious dominance, etc.) instead of the historical root causes of the conflict. History, I contend, is useful for providing an in-depth understanding of conflict in the north because it allows us to trace the origins of the conflict to the formation of identity and the colonial experience. Simply put, identity formation in northern Nigeria differs from the rest of the country – Islam in the region represents an ethnoreligious and political identity for northern Muslims and not for the rest of the country. This explains the "religious" nature of the conflict in northern Nigeria. But identity alone does not explain why conflict occurs in that region. Therefore, I argue that uneven economic development policies (via trade, commerce, infrastructure, education, and language) implemented by the British colonial rule placed the northern region in an economically and politically disadvantaged position (compared to the rest of the country), resulting in a high rate of poverty, unemployment, and political instability that has persisted to today. These factors, I argue, increase grievances and make the region susceptible to conflict and violence. Further, the failure of political leaders in

northern Nigeria to meet the needs of the northern population and improve socioeconomic conditions has worsened the conflict.

In the next section, I provide a historical trajectory of religious and ethnic identity formation and economic development from precolonial to postcolonial Nigeria and explain why conflict occurs in northern Nigeria but is absent in southern Nigeria.

SECTION 3

IDENTITY FORMATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Precolonial Nigeria (pre-19th Century – 19th Century)

Looking at its precolonial history, Nigeria has not always been a conflict-ridden country. Though wars between kingdoms and empires were common in precolonial Nigeria, they were different in nature and scope than what we see today among different ethnic and religious groups. Also, there were different indigenous religions, but they coexisted peacefully (Adogame 2015). Further, indigenous groups under different decentralized and centralized political systems existed but were not solidified under a defined ethnic or religious identity like what we have today as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa (among other ethnic identities). In fact, the name "Nigeria" is a colonial creation. The name was given by Flora Shaw, the future Lady Lugard, the wife of Lord Lugard, the then Governor-General of colonial Nigeria (McCaslin 2018).

Wars were central to state-making in precolonial Nigeria for economic and political reasons. For example, Falola and Heaton (2008) describe some of the territorial and political struggles of the old Oyo Empire in the nineteenth century (Falola and Heaton 2008). They show that the Oyo Empire faced internal challenges from conflicts and palace politics by some of its palace officers who usurped the authority of the *alafin,* the king of the empire. The empire also faced external challenges from kingdoms like Dahomey:

> Dahomey continued to put up resistance to Oyo's control of routes to the coast, and had cut off Oyo's access to Porto Novo by 1807, forcing Oyo to move its slaves further east, to Lagos, for sale. A full-scale revolt by Dahomey occurred later, in 1823, resulting in the termination of the tributary relationship with Oyo (Falola and Heaton 2008:75).

Introduction of Foreign Religions and Identity Formation (pre-19th Century – 19th Century)

Nigerians have historically practiced indigenous religions that connect to their indigenous identities. But in the eleventh century, Islam was introduced to Nigeria by Islamic traders and scholars. However, it only started gaining widespread interest in northern Nigeria (within the Hausa states) in the fourteenth century when it became generally accepted, and northern Nigerians began to identify as Muslims (Falola and Heaton 2008). The Islamic identity in northern Nigeria took a more entrenched form by a group of *reformers* led by a scholar, Usman dan Fodio, who began a *jihad* movement in 1804 to "purify" the practice of a "mixed Islam," which involved the belief in Islam and indigenous religion (Hiskett 1976). The *jihad* brought northern Nigeria under one Islamic identity, both politically and culturally:

> In the northern savanna zones, the Islamic jihad of Usman dan Fodio led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, an expansive state that brought under one government all the Hausa states, as well as some former provinces of Borno and lands that had once been under the control of Oyo and the Jukun states, in the south and southeast respectively. Although dan Fodio and his successors were never able to implement the ideal Islamic state that they sought to build, they had nevertheless reconfigured the political and cultural landscape of the northern savanna towards a primary identification with Islam by the time British colonial forces sacked Sokoto in 1903 (Falola and Heaton 2008:61).

Islam also spread to southern Nigeria, for example, among the Yoruba in Oyo and Ilorin between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries but did not have the same influence as in northern Nigeria. *Jihad* did not occur in southern Nigeria, and southern Nigeria has been a religiously mixed region where Christianity was introduced around the fifteenth century by

Portuguese traders. However, Christianity did not spread widely until the first half of the nineteenth century with the activities of Christian missionaries, which were further consolidated by British colonialism (Falola and Heaton 2008). Christianity was embraced in southern Nigeria among the Yoruba and the Igbo, including other smaller ethnic groups, but did not spread significantly in northern Nigeria because of the strong influence of Islam and Islamic identity formation in that region (Falola and Heaton 2008).

This difference in the introduction and reception of Islam and Christianity in northern and southern Nigeria has two implications for identity formation across the two regions. First, unlike in northern Nigeria, where the *jihad* occurred and created a united Islamic identity for northerners, there was no such united religious identity in southern Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba, where there are also Muslims. Given that there was neither *jihad* nor the idea of reform among Muslims in southern Nigeria, Muslims in the south witnessed few religiously oriented tensions. But in northern Nigeria, the division within the Muslim community can be attributed to the constant effort to reform (purify) Islam. For instance, the Boko Haram extremist group has claimed to practice a pristine Islam. Second, the *jihad* in northern Nigeria united most northerners (except non-Muslim northerners [the Christian minority groups and those practicing traditional religions]) under a single Islamic, ethnic, and political identity as "northerners." I contend that these ethnoreligious and politico-religious identities are inseparable, unlike in southern Nigeria, where ethnic identity and religious identity are separate. For example, a Yoruba Muslim in the south is more likely to identify politically as a Yoruba than a Muslim. Therefore, I suggest that because of these fused ethnic, religious, and political identities in northern Nigeria that are linked to Islam, conflict in that region, is often seen as *religious* compared to southern Nigeria.

Colonial Nigeria (mid-19th Century – 1960)

Colonialism took hold in the mid-nineteenth century to advance British economic project to extract resources (for example, cocoa, palm oil, and groundnut) from Nigeria to Europe. Colonial rule restructured what we now know as Nigeria economically, politically, and culturally and placed different indigenous groups under two colonies: Northern Protectorate and Southern Protectorate, but later amalgamated them under a single administration in 1914 (Falola and Heaton 2008). This British administrative restructuring sought to incorporate all Nigerians. Such incorporation was evident in socioeconomic, educational, and political policies. But the policies implemented in the south, I argue, were fundamentally different from those in the north, leading to uneven economic development (manifested in trade, commerce, education, and infrastructure) between southern Nigeria and northern Nigeria, with the north at a disadvantage compared to the south. Also, the implementation of the policies led to unintended consequences of what I call *integration* of the south and *isolation* of the north. Indeed, southern Nigeria was integrated into various colonial policies, which consequently enhanced economic development in the region, while northern Nigeria was isolated from those policies. Integration of the south and isolation of the north, I suggest, explain the absence of conflict in southern Nigeria and its presence in northern Nigeria.

Further, it is important to note that the *integration* and *isolation* I describe here also depended on the perception and reception by southerners and northerners of colonialism. Indeed, southerners were more receptive to British colonial rule than northerners (Coleman 1958). For example, policies such as the introduction of Western education and English language, missionary activities in the south, the development of infrastructure in the south, and other economic development activities in the south consequently led to the integration of southerners

into the new colonial system. However, the introduction of Western education and English language through Christian missionaries, though accepted by the non-Muslims in the north, for most northerners, was unacceptable as it symbolized Christianity, a religion they perceived to be in opposition to Islam. As Boahen (1987) notes, there are three main strategies that Africans used in response to colonial domination – submission, alliance, and confrontation and even confrontation varied from more diplomatic and peaceful means to armed struggle. For example, Yoruba rulers in the southwest submitted to colonial rule because they either found confrontation unproductive or saw collaboration as beneficial as they sought protection from the British against other intruding kingdoms and empires (Boahen 1987; Falola and Heaton 2008). But in the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria, contact with British colonizers was violent because northern rulers, viewing the Europeans as *unbelievers*, refused to submit or collaborate with them; instead, northern leaders challenged the colonizers in battle but were eventually defeated by the British (Boahen 1987; Falola and Heaton 2008). Hence, while Nigerians in the south were more receptive to colonial rule and policies, in northern Nigeria, these policies were not fully accepted.

In what follows, I examine these colonial policies focusing on four factors that explain the uneven development between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria.

First, European contact with southern Nigeria and northern Nigeria differed in time. Southern Nigeria had contact with the Europeans for up to half a century before northern Nigeria (Lugard and Kirk-Greene 1968). This meant that European influence in trade, commerce, and education in southern Nigeria put the region developmentally ahead of northern Nigeria, which was not open to European contact until 1903 (when the region was conquered by the British)

because of its conservative Islamic tradition, which was suspicious of European activities and considered the British government as Christians (Lugard and Kirk-Greene 1968).

Second, the proximity of southern protectorates to coastal areas compared to the north with no coastline meant that the bulk of the colonial administration's commerce took place in southern Nigeria without a corresponding development in northern Nigeria. Since colonialism was an economic project focusing on extracting raw materials from colonies to Europe, southern Nigeria's possession of a coastline, which aided colonial trade and commerce, contributed to economic prospects and the development of modern infrastructure and services in the south. Falola and Heaton (2008), for instance, note the development in Lagos (southwestern Nigeria) during this period:

> In Lagos, for example, the colonial government had established a Medical Department, which employed eleven European and three African doctors by 1898, a police service, and a Public Works Department charged with the maintenance of public buildings and roads and the extension of electric lighting, telegraphs, piers, and public transport, among other things. In the southeast, Ralph Moor became a champion of the use of the colonial government to extend European education in the early part of the twentieth century. (P. 116)

Sir William N.M. Geary (Geary 1965:25) also describes Lagos during the period of the slave trade as a place "commanding the sea entrance to this large system of inland waterways," which made trade convenient. Also, the amalgamation of Lagos and other parts of the south, called "Southern Nigeria," in 1906 further increased the economic prospects of southern Nigeria. However, despite a further amalgamation of northern Nigeria with southern Nigeria in 1914, the north remained in a lagged position without much improvement. Geary (1965) states the economic condition of northern Nigeria in the nineteenth century:

> Northern Nigeria differed from the other West African Colonies in having no coast-line. It is about 250 miles from the sea. It lies mainly beyond the Oil belt. Except for the tin mines which were started in 1906, its exports are not important; e.g. in 1912, after the railway to Kano was completed, they were, including tin, only £724,770, which was less than the expenditure. The imports are also trifling. (P. 208)

Geary further (1965) states the revenue and taxation from the north:

> Northern Nigeria has no seaboard and therefore it is not competent to resort to the usual indirect taxation wherefrom West African Governments derive their revenue of custom duties on seaborn imports, and there is no customs frontier between Northern and Southern Nigeria except as to an import duty, surtax on salt, though there are customs duties on goods imported over the land frontiers, on the French boundary, which produce a small return. (P. 232)

Comparing the revenue from the north with that of the south, Carland (1985:119) also notes that the "local revenue for [the north in] 1901/2 was £4,424. By 1905/6 this had risen to £110,544, and by 1910/11 to £274,989. However, in the same years, Southern Nigeria's revenue was £361,815, £550,233 and £1,933,235 respectively."

Third, the north and the south economically emerged differently because of the nature of trade and commerce in the regions. Unlike southern Nigeria, where European imports were abundant, northern Nigeria merely focused on locally made goods. Geary (1965) notes the nature of trade in colonial northern Nigeria:

> Northern Nigeria seems to provide within its borders everything that enters into the daily life of the people. The consequence is that imports and exports of the territory, when the vast extent and great population of the country are taken into consideration, are almost trifling. During 1909-10 the estimated value of the imports into Northern Nigeria,

> excluding Government goods, railway material and specie, was only £331,000, while the exports barely exceeded a total of £400,000.
>
> The absence of European goods from the market may in part, perhaps, be ascribed to immigrant black traders from Southern Nigeria, who would travel with such goods, being discouraged by the Government. The legal system of Northern Nigeria whereby such native traders were subject to the Provincial courts or even, with the consent of the Resident, to Native Courts under the heavy hand of the dogarai and flogging, deterred and frightened away the coast-trader who might otherwise have hawked British goods. (P. 237)

Finally, in an attempt not to disrupt the Islamic cultural tradition of northern Nigeria as a *promise* that the colonial government made to northerners when it entered the north (northerners were initially concerned that the colonial administration would interfere with their religion), the government prevented any effort to interfere with their religion, including Christian missionaries' attempts to introduce Western education to the Muslim areas of northern Nigeria (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). According to Lord Lugard, the then High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria, "if the advent of missions is authorised by the Government, it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion in the minds of the people [northerners] that they are under the special aegis of Government" (Lugard and Kirk-Greene 1968:160).

Lugard was careful not to upset the cultural traditions of the peoples of northern Nigeria because he was more concerned about their cooperation for ease of colonial rule in a place where he faced financial and personnel challenges. Hence, he focused on collaboration, not religious competition (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). This decision came to have developmental consequences for northern Nigeria as the region was prevented from any influence (educational, political, and economic) considered disruptive (Ozigi and Ocho 1981).

Therefore, due to these differences in colonial policies in both regions, southern Nigeria became *integrated* into the colonial system and continued to thrive economically and educationally, while northern Nigeria became *isolated* and lagged in these areas.

In the following subsection, I examine the development of education in the south and the north and its effects on southerners and northerners.

Introduction of Western Education and English Language

Northern Nigeria is known for its rich Islamic culture and education. But because Western education is the generally acceptable educational training for professional development and the workforce, this is the type of "education" I refer to in this section.

The history of education development in Nigeria dates to the periods of mission work in the coastal areas of southern Nigeria in the early sixteenth century (Ogunsola 1974). Through the spread of Christianity, missionaries introduced education to southern Nigeria (for example, in Yorubaland and Old Calabar) as indigenous peoples and their traditional rulers saw no spiritual benefits but political and military advantages from accepting the missionaries during a period where kingdoms and empires were at war with each other over political expansion (Ayandele 1966). The southern people were also interested in the benefits of the "white man's education" for their children (Ayandele 1966).

The credit for developing education in Nigeria goes to the missionaries, but the kind of education they focused on was essentially elementary, not higher education. According to Bishop Crowther:

> the best people for the spread of Christianity were those who lacked literary pretensions. They were mainly middle-aged shoemakers, shinglemakers, carpenters, farmers, bricklayers, Government messengers and stewards on board ships, people who had no

> formal education of any kind or very elementary education for two or three years in a mission school (Ayandele 1966:286).

Indeed, the mission's main objective was moral and religious education, with the belief that higher education was not good for the spread of Christianity:

> From the mission viewpoint, higher education was not conducive to the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. This was because, in the circumstances of a pacified Nigeria, many of the mission agents found one excuse or the other to resign their appointment in mission work in order to take employment in Government services or in commercial establishments (Ayandele 1966:288).

The missionaries did not witness great enthusiasm for Christianity and education in northern Nigeria as they did in southern Nigeria. As previously noted, Islam had already been established in northern Nigeria before the coming of the missionaries. Hence the Christian missionaries had to deal with converting Muslims to Christians in the region. But this was met with two major obstacles. First, northerners' deeply entrenched belief in Islam due to the *jihad* of Usman dan Fodio in 1804 and the colonial administration's reluctance to interfere in the religion of northerners as it had promised northern traditional rulers. Hence, the missionaries could only freely proselytize and establish educational institutions in the non-Muslim areas (minority areas) of the north (Ayandele 1966). In the Muslim areas (most of the north), parents cited the insignificance of Western education as one of the reasons for not embracing mission education for their children (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). They did not believe having a Western education would necessarily lead to a successful life.

Second, northerners also believed Islamic education suited their ways of life because it reflected their culture. Local leaders were equally concerned that allowing Western education could threaten their legitimacy and disrupt the existing leadership structure (Ozigi and Ocho

1981). The colonial government was likewise concerned about introducing anything that could cause disruptions in the region despite recognizing the importance of Western education for the people of northern Nigeria. Yet, because the colonial government was ruling through the traditional leaders (emirs) through a process called *Indirect Rule*, it needed the cooperation of the leaders and avoided any activity that could upset the tranquility in the region. Hence, the administration only allowed mission work in the non-Muslim areas of the region (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). Beyond this, the government also had a greater concern with its experience regarding the effect of missionary education in other British colonies:

> Lugard and his senior political officers, the Residents, preferred a secular to a religious system of education for the Muslims of northern Nigeria. This preference was supported by the Colonial Office in London. The British administrators had reasons for this preference other than the fear of antagonising the rulers and jeopardising the peaceful occupation and exploitation of the area. The uncontrolled expansion of mission education in India, southern Nigeria and other British Crown colonies had produced people averse to manual work, interested in little beyond pen-pushing, and contemptuous of their own culture. These mission-educated groups had become conscious of their rights as human beings and had started to demand a share of political, economic and administrative power from their British rulers. In general, they did not exhibit the same type of reverence, fear and obedience towards the white man as their illiterate brothers and sisters (Ozigi and Ocho 1981:40).

But because the colonial government was still interested in making Western education available to the people of northern Nigeria and because education was at the time in the hands of the missionaries for financial and personnel reasons, the colonial administration had to

collaborate with the missionaries to provide education to the *mallams*[6], and sons of the chiefs in northern Nigeria in a plan called the *Zaria Experiment* (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). The Zaria Experiment "was the first detailed plan for education in Northern Nigeria. From this one station it was hoped that the successful experiment would develop to fulfil the educational need of the [northern] Protectorate, recognized by both mission and [colonial] administration" (Graham 1955:93). The belief was that educated leaders (mallams) would mean better rulership and colonial cooperation in the region (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). In 1907, the schools officially began operating in Zaria but were marred by low interest and attendance because pupils were more interested in their local institutions (Graham 1955). Also, the education plan was to provide only secular education and not interfere with the religious education of the people (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). However, the Christian missions could not provide a purely secular education but a mixed one, which included Christian education (Ozigi and Ocho 1981).

With the failure of the Zaria Experiment, the colonial government had to take control of the situation by establishing its own schools, which were planned to be purely secular (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). After the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria in 1914, different education ordinances (which brought education in both regions under the colonial government) were passed to improve education standards across the country (Ozigi and Ocho 1981; also see Ogunsola 1974). In 1909, a new educational system was introduced by the colonial government in northern Nigeria. The system was to be carried out by Hans Vischer, a Resident in the country at the time. Vischer aimed to have a system "that was suited to the culture of the people" and "wanted to retain what he regarded as the best in native culture while grafting on to it what he considered good in European culture" (Lugard and Kirk-Greene 1968; Ozigi and Ocho 1981:44).

[6] Anyone who teaches (usually male) is called "mallam" in northern Nigeria. But in the context of this study, they are educated leaders.

For example, the language of instruction was the local language, and attendees were allowed to wear traditional clothing. Lessons made references to local culture and geography in addition to knowledge about Africa and the global environment. Fridays and Sundays were declared holidays so students could attend Islamic prayers (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). But despite these efforts and just like the Zaria Experiment, Vischer's education system in the north failed because it was unrealistic and unfitted to the current "Western political and economic system that demanded not only a good knowledge of English but also a knowledge of Western administration" (Ozigi and Ocho 1981:45). The school system did not teach English at the primary school level and made it optional at the secondary school level. As a result, northerners were not at par with their counterparts in southern Nigeria, who received a different form of education which was of better quality. Also, northerners could not take up formal employment in government service like southerners (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). As Coleman (1958:140) notes, "the absence of an English-speaking educated class in northern Nigeria in the early period [of colonial rule] necessitated the importation of thousands of southerners into the north as clerks and artisans." This action infuriated northerners and made them resent southerners, who they perceived as dominating the north. Therefore, despite the colonial government's takeover of education from the missionaries, the progress of education in northern Nigeria remained stalled compared to southern Nigeria. For example, Ekundare (1973) notes the differences in the development of education in the north and the south during this period:

> The number of schools which existed before 1944 was very small, considering the population which they were supposed to serve. For example, in 1913 there were 43 elementary schools and only 1 primary school in the whole of Northern Nigeria, and all were supported by various missionary societies. In contrast there were 14,611 Moslem

> schools in Northern Nigeria in the same year. In Southern Nigeria in 1913 there were 534 schools, which included elementary, primary and secondary schools. (P. 356-7)

Also, "the total output from northern primary schools in 1947 was 70,962 compared to 218,610 in the south; whilst the secondary school output was 251 compared to 9,657 in southern secondary schools" (Ozigi and Ocho 1981:57).

The stalled progress in the north was due to several factors, some of which have been previously noted. First, the insufficient commitment of the colonial government to develop education in the north due to political and economic reasons, late contact of northerners with the Europeans, Islamic identity, and the reluctance of northerners to see the value of Western education until later on. Also, the government's expenditure on education was restricted and worsened by the depression of the 1930s and the Second World War (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). But as Nigerians were demanding independence from colonial rule, and nationalist movements across the country were underway, the northern elite (northern leaders) became concerned about the state of development in the region and desired a better north:

> As a result of the increase in nationalist activities, growing political awareness and increasing public enlightenment in most parts of the country, the northern elite became acutely aware and increasingly apprehensive of the educational problems facing the people, severe shortage of manpower, low enrolments at all levels of education, general lack of enthusiasm for the Western type of education, particularly in Muslim areas, educational disparity between the north and the south, between riverain and far northern areas, between boys and girls. Indeed, they realised that education was the key to social and economic progress, without which the people of the north could not reasonably be expected to play any meaningful role in the affairs of an independent Nigeria (Ozigi and Ocho 1981:58).

Despite this awareness and commitment to improving education in the north, postcolonial northern Nigeria has not fared better. Lingering problems of low enrolment, lack of funding, and poor quality of teachers and instruction remain (Ozigi and Ocho 1981). This, I contend, is due to the unintended effects of British colonial policies, which caused the integration of southern Nigerians into Western education and the workforce and isolation of northern Nigerians.

In the following subsection, I focus on postcolonial Nigeria and show that the uneven economic development between the north and the south caused by former colonial policies persists in the postcolonial period and the socioeconomic conditions of the north since independence have not improved, leading to the presence of conflict in the north and its absence in the south.

Postcolonial Nigeria (1960 –)

In the previous subsection, I demonstrated how colonial policies created vast economic inequality between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria. One main area where this is evident is *education*. But the north also lags in other areas. For example, in 1952, its per capita income "was estimated to be half as large as the West's [southern Nigeria], and its rate of urbanisation was less than half that in the South" (Diamond 1988:27). This unequal economic development persists today as a legacy of colonialism. Further, the economic changes in the 1970s and 1980s though made life difficult for many Nigerians, but more severe impacts of such changes were felt in the north, which was already experiencing economic challenges (International Crisis Group 2010). For example, Nigeria's move from dependence on agriculture to dependence on oil in the 1970s and 1980s meant agriculture, which was a mainstay of the northern economy, declined

(International Crisis Group 2010). Also, the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs[7] in the 1980s liberalized the Nigerian economy, opening the country to a host of foreign goods, which stifled the growth of local industries in the north, leading to their collapse (Hoffmann 2014). These economic problems are persisting and evident today as presented in Tables 1-5 below, showing comparisons[8] between the north and the south in poverty, healthcare, access to electricity, and employment, and throughout the tables, the north lags. For example, Table 1 shows that in 2019, Sokoto, Taraba, and Jigawa, all northern states had the highest poverty headcount rate (87.7%).

Table 1. Comparing North and South Poverty, 2019

S/N	Poverty headcount rates in 10 states in the north	% of population	Poverty headcount rates in 10 states in the south	% of population
1	Sokoto	87.7	Ebonyi	79.8
2	Taraba	87.7	Enugu	58.1
3	Jigawa	87.0	Cross River	36.3
4	Adamawa	75.4	Abia	30.7
5	Zamfara	74.0	Imo	28.9
6	Yobe	72.3	Edo	12.0
7	Niger	66.1	Oyo	9.8
8	Gombe	62.3	Ogun	9.3
9	Bauchi	61.5	Osun	8.5
10	Nasarawa	57.3	Lagos	4.5

Source: Table compiled by the author from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2019:9)

Similarly, Table 2 shows that in 2010, the poorest geopolitical zones – North East, North West, and North Central – were in the north, with the highest population of people with no

[7] Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were a series of economic reforms introduced by the postcolonial Nigerian government under General Ibrahim Babangida to address the economic crisis that Nigeria faced in the 1980s. The economic reforms were generally part of global efforts by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to introduce SAPs to "assist" countries going through economic crises but under the condition of "export intensification and on shrinking the role of the state in social protection, public infrastructure, and service provision" (McMichael and Weber 2022:100).

[8] I have provided economic and well-being indicators only for available years. Recent data for these indicators are not available.

schooling at all (63.7%, 63.8%, 36.8%, respectively), low adult literacy level, and high unemployment rate.

Table 2. Indicators of Socio-economic Deprivation in Nigeria by Zone, 2010

Zone	Absolute poverty	No schooling	Adult literacy	Unemployment
North East	69.0	63.7	23.0	31.9
North West	70.0	63.8	21.6	28.8
North Central	59.5	36.8	47.0	28.8
South East	58.7	14.4	81.8	19.6
South West	49.8	17.2	79.8	11.4
South South	55.9	10.7	77.1	24.6

Source: NPC DHS Education Data Survey 2010; NBS Poverty Profile 2010; NBS Annual Socio-Economic Report 2011 in Mustapha and Meagher (2020:14)

In healthcare (Table 3), the ratio of population to total healthcare facility (333) in Adamawa in northeastern Nigeria in 2004 was 9,048, with a population of over 3 million people, compared to Osun in southwestern Nigeria (with a total healthcare facility of 853) with a ratio of 3,846 with a similar population count.

Table 3. Health Care Facilities Population Ratio by State, 2004

Northern states	Population	Total health facility	Ratio of pop. to HF	Southern states	Population	Total health facility	Ratio of pop. to HF
Adamawa	3,013,043	333	9,048	Osun	3,280,267	853	3,846
Borno	3,806,316	454	8,384	Imo	3,783,043	905	4,180
Gombe	2,152,197	247	8,713	Abia	2,751,156	748	3,678
Taraba	2,258,552	611	3,696	Kwara	2,330,089	566	4,117
Yobe	2,277,687	265	8,595	Cross River	2,845,682	544	5,231

Source: Suleiman and Aminul Karim (2015:9); modified by the author
Note. pop. = population; HF = health facility

In the same Adamawa in 2007, 71.4% of the population had no access to electricity (Table 4) compared to Osun, with 29% of the population without electricity.

Table 4. Type of Electricity Supply, 2007

Northern states	PHCN only (gov. company)	Rural electrification only	None	Southern states	PHCN only (gov. company)	Rural electrification only	None
Adamawa	22.2	0.0	71.4	Edo	80.7	0.0	16.9
Bauchi	38.7	0.0	58.5	Ogun	71.3	0.4	27.1
Borno	19.4	4.6	64.5	Imo	68.5	1.4	20.8
Gombe	50.	00	49.3	Osun	67.6	1.6	29.0
Taraba	3.7	0.7	91.0	Delta	62.7	0.0	30.2
Yobe	16.2	0.4	82.9	Ondo	58.0	0.0	29.0

Source: Suleiman and Aminul Karim (2015:8); modified by the author

Further, the number of medical doctors in Katsina (one of the most populated states in Nigeria) in 2011 was just 8 (Table 5) whereas, in Lagos (also one of the most populated states in the country), there were 2,575 doctors in the same year.

Table 5. Number of Medical Doctors by State

	Year			Year	
Northern states	2010	2011	Southern states	2010	2011
Adamawa	58	6	Lagos	2,029	2,575
Bauchi	31	4	Edo	603	722
Borno	154	168	Oyo	517	602
Gombe	76	81	Plateau	354	368
Taraba	8	66	Rivers	587	604
Yobe	34	2	Kwara	348	379
Jigawa	48	6	Kaduna	488	323
Katsina	21	8	Osun	345	463

Source: Suleiman and Aminul Karim (2015:9)

Finally, oil is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, and oil revenue is shared between states based on a derivation formula that allocates 13% of the revenue to oil-producing states (Delta, Bayelsa, Edo, Rivers, Imo, Abia, Ondo, and Akwa Ibom), all in the south (Ejechi 2022). The rest of the revenues are redistributed to the rest of the states in the south and the north based on factors such as population, geography, and development indicators like the number of school enrollment, hospital beds, and access to clean water (Ahmad and Singh 2003). But despite the north's access to oil revenue, it still lags behind the south. For example, in the 2023 National

Bureau of Statistics report on the Federation Account Allocation Committee disbursement of oil revenue, Sokoto, one of the poorest regions in the north, was allocated over N3bn in oil revenue (National Bureau of Statistics 2023).

I argue that these economic issues have culminated in conflict in northern Nigeria. In the subsection that follows, I trace the emergence of the conflict in the north from after the end of colonialism until the present period and contend that the unequal economic developmental legacy of colonialism, which persists today, explains the presence of conflict in the north and its absence in the south. I also discuss the role of northern political leaders in addressing these issues.

Conflict in northern Nigeria

Though my argument in this study is that the source of conflict in northern Nigeria can be attributed to the uneven economic development between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria created by colonialism, conflict was not a common occurrence in the north during colonial rule since conflict would have been repressed by the colonial administration. However, conflict began to take shape as colonialism ended and Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Given that southern Nigeria had become, to a large extent, integrated into the colonial policies, as independence was approaching, northern leaders began to fear southern domination and made efforts to give visibility to the north and address the economic underdevelopment of the region in the newly independent Nigerian state. Therefore, tensions in northern Nigeria due to the unequal economic development between the north and the south gradually culminated in conflict in the north, which was mostly perceived as “religious” conflict. Table 6 below shows a timeline of major conflicts in the north in the postcolonial period.

Table 6. Timeline of Major Conflicts in northern Nigeria

Year	Conflict
1980	Maitatsine uprising in Kano
1982	Fagge crisis in Kano
1987	Violence in Kafanchan, Kaduna
1991	Reinhard Bonnke riots in Kano Bauchi violence
2000	Muslim-Christian clashes over the introduction of Sharia, mainly in Kano and Kaduna
2001	Jos violence
2002	Violence over the hosting of Miss World, mainly in Kaduna
2004	Plateau violence
2006	Violence over Danish cartoons' depiction of Prophet Mohammed
2009 – present	Boko Haram violence

Source: Falola 1998; International Crisis Group 2010

Conflicts considered religious in northern Nigeria can be said to have begun mainly in the 1980s. Though, there were a few ethnoreligious conflicts before the 1980s, for example, clashes between Hausa and Igbo migrants in Kano in 1953 and the killings of Igbos in the north due to the July coup that toppled Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi (Alabi 2002; International Crisis Group 2010). However, my analysis of "religious" conflicts starts with conflicts in the north since the 1980s. Below, I divide the conflicts into those that occurred within the Muslim population in northern Nigeria and those between Muslims and Christians in the north. Though the conflicts

are often categorized as religious, I argue that unequal socioeconomic development during the colonial era provides a better explanation for the prevalence of the conflicts. No doubt, religious identity persists and is entrenched in the conflicts, especially for Muslims in northern Nigeria. But religion alone is insufficient in explaining the occurrence, prevalence, and persistence of the conflicts. Rather, factors relating to long-standing poverty, marginalization, and deprivation resulting from British colonial policies and persisting to today can provide a better explanation for the source of the conflicts.

Intra-Muslim Conflict

Intra-Muslim conflicts are common in northern Nigeria, unlike southern Nigeria. Such conflicts center on sectarian disagreement on issues such as, "forms of worship, the interpretation of Qur'an, or Islamic law" (Falola 1998:228). Falola (1998) provides a detailed explanation as to why Muslims disagree over religious matters. First is the interpretation of the history of Islam. He argues that while all Muslims believe in the prophethood of Muhammed, they disagree on issues such as "the role of the imam, *umma*, the importance of devotion, and legal matters" (Falola 1998:231). Second, is the issue of reform, an attempt to "purify" Islam of "non-Islamic practices, corruption within Islamic society, and perceived misinterpretations and misrepresentations of doctrines" (Falola 1998:231). Mahdism, or the belief in a savior, who will reform the world, is a third issue among Muslims, with different Muslim leaders claiming to be the Mahdi. Fourth, many northern Muslims tend to view Western culture with suspicion, a central reason why Western education was not immediately accepted in the Muslim-majority areas of northern Nigeria during the colonial period. Certainly, not all northern Muslims are opposed to Western influence, but those that support it are often seen as weak in faith by those that are anti-Western. Finally, and more important to the focus of this study, is the role of

economic development and the place of Muslims in Nigerian society. Muslims who are better off in northern Nigeria (the minority) view Islam differently than the poor majority. The rich are more likely to see Islam as a religion that is more liberal and encourages social and economic interactions and connection with others, for example, through wealthy neighborhood associations. But for the poor, Islam becomes a way to express grievances related to the ills of society and to demand change (Falola 1998).

Despite the issues within Muslims mostly centering on religious matters (reform, Mahdism, etc.), I argue that religious matters alone cannot explain the source of conflict in northern Nigeria, especially considering that there are Muslims in southern Nigeria who face similar religious issues within Islam but do not resort to violence. Hence, what differentiates northern Muslims from southern Muslims is economic inequality (see Tables 1-5; also see Figures 2 & 3 in the Appendix). This unequalness as previously noted was created as a result of colonial policies and continues today, evident in the rate of poverty, school enrollment, infrastructure, and unemployment in the two regions, where southern Muslims are better off than their northern counterparts. Therefore, factors like poverty and deprivation have made conflicts possible and sustainable in northern Nigeria. Below, I illustrate the presence and prevalence of conflict in the north through two of the most notorious intra-Muslim conflicts in the region: The Maitatsine uprising of the 1980s and Boko Haram extremism.

1. Maitatsine Uprising

The term *Maitatsine* refers to the nickname of Muhammadu Marwa, the leader of a radical Islamic group in northern Nigeria in the 1980s. He was a preacher from Cameroon concerned with "purifying" Islam and was anti-Western (Adesoji 2011). He saw anyone following Western ideas as an unbeliever (BBC 2012), preaching against goods and items

considered Western such as wristwatches, motorcycles, motor cars, and bicycles (Albert 2013). He recruited his members from the poor in the north. The government began to be concerned about the group as Marwa and his members terrorized people and became involved in clashes with the police and the army, which led to the death of Maitatsine. It was estimated that thousands of people were killed during the uprising (BBC 2012; Albert 2013).

2. Boko Haram

There have been several studies on Boko Haram (for example, see Loimeier 2012; Hansen 2017; de Montclos 2018; Mustapha and Meagher 2020). My aim here is not to provide a report or review of these studies. Instead, I discuss Boko Haram activities as an example of intra-Muslim conflict in northern Nigeria and its link to the unfavorable economic conditions caused by colonialism in the north, which has continued to today.

Various factors explain why people join Boko Haram, one of which is economic, manifesting as *poverty*, *deprivation*, and *marginalization*. I have argued in this study that this economic factor (uneven economic development created by colonialism between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria) is central to understanding the source of conflict in northern Nigeria. Other factors that have been identified for joining Boko Haram include the need to belong and be respected, political motives, and revenge as a response to the extrajudicial killings of locals and Boko Haram members by the Nigerian security forces (Botha and Abdile 2016). *Contrary to general belief, religion is not a central factor in joining Boko Haram*. In a survey by Botha and Abdile (2016), only 9.24% of Boko Haram respondents said they joined the group for religious reasons.

Despite these other factors (aside from economic) explaining why people want to be a part of Boko Haram, the emergence of the group itself is closely tied to grievances centering on

poverty, deprivation, and marginalization in northern Nigeria. Tracing its origin to its founder, Muhammed Yusuf, he was against anything Western and secular (like Maitatsine) and built the base of his membership from the underclass in northern Nigeria – the poor and unemployed (International Crisis Group 2010). Mustapha and Meagher (2020) note that the emergence of Boko Haram may not be seen as grievances from an individual or a few individuals but as group marginalization linked to the economic state of northern Nigeria in poverty, unemployment, low Human Development Index, and illiteracy. In 2009, Yusuf and his group members had a clash with the police, which led to Yusuf's death. As a result, his members launched a reprisal attack through a prison break, freeing many prisoners, including Boko Haram members (International Crisis Group 2010). Since 2010, Boko Haram has engaged in killings, kidnappings, and destruction of property in northern Nigeria.

Though there are diverse views regarding at what point economic factors became important in explaining the operations of Maitatsine and Boko Haram (see, for example, Lubeck 1985; Hiskett 1987; Isichei 1987), many of the studies agree that factors like marginalization, deprivation, and poverty play a central role in the activities of the groups. No doubt, both groups, based on their ethnoreligious identity, emerged in reaction to various issues such as "purifying" Islam and avoiding anything secular and Western. However, they were able to sustain their membership and continue operating by recruiting the poor members of society who are frustrated by the economic backwardness of northern Nigeria and see the radical groups as avenues through which they can express their grievances and get justice (Albert 2013; Mustapha and Meagher 2020). Hence, the legacy of colonialism in the north has made it possible for these radical groups to emerge and thrive due to extreme poverty and deprivation.

Christian-Muslim Conflict

Economic marginalization is also a central element in the Christian-Muslim conflict in northern Nigeria. Similar to conflicts within Muslim groups in the north, the origins of conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the north date back to colonial Nigeria when ethnoreligious identity, anti-western, and anti-Christian sentiments of northern Muslims, on the one hand, and the colonial administration's hands-off policies in the north, on the other hand, resulted in the isolation of the north from the south and economically put the south ahead of the north. Below, I use three main periods – 1982, 1991, and 2000 –when Muslim-Christian conflicts occurred in northern Nigeria as illustrative examples.

1. 1982 Fagge Crisis in Kano

The 1982 Fagge crisis in Kano is significant because it is the first major conflict between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria. The source of the crisis was an attempt to rebuild Christ Church, a church in Fagge which was already falling apart. Muslims in the area stood against the reconstruction of the church, arguing that it is situated near a mosque, hence, should not be rebuilt. As a result of the tensions, three churches across Kano were burned down, and a few others were destroyed (Albert 2013).

2. 1991 Crises

There were two major crises in northern Nigeria in 1991: The Reinhard Bonnke riots in Kano and the violence in Bauchi. The Reinhard Bonnke crisis is linked to a German preacher, Reinhard Bonnke, who had planned to hold a Christian revival in Kano in October 1991. But the event was canceled because it sparked violent reactions from Muslims in Kano. Muslims claimed the government had earlier denied a visa to an imam from South Africa who was to visit Kano

but allowed Reinhard Bonnke to hold a revival in Kano. The crisis led to the death of up to 200 people and the destruction of homes and shops (The Associated Press 1991; Maier 1991).

Around April of the same year, violence erupted in Bauchi, stemming from a misunderstanding between a Christian butcher and a Muslim beef buyer. There are two versions of the story. The first is about a Christian butcher seen by a Muslim as an infidel, and the second version alleged that the meat sold to the Muslim is pork instead of beef. This led to a scuffle between both men, leading to a larger-scale conflict between Muslims and Christians in Bauchi (Falola 1998). According to Falola (1998:205), the conflict escalated because of the existing rivalry between Christians and Muslims in Bauchi due to "economic decline in the country, religious divides and manipulation, and attempts by [Christian] minorities [in the north] to assert themselves." This view is in line with my argument of a fear of Christians and southern domination expressed by Muslims in the north.

3. Clashes Over the Introduction of Sharia in 2000

During the colonial period, the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) in the north was allowed by the colonial government but restricted to civil cases only, preventing punishment such as lashing (International Crisis Group 2010). But in 1959, the colonial administration expunged the law when it became concerned that it was incompatible with human rights in a multireligious Nigeria, replacing it with a Penal Code "that established a Sharia court of appeal with jurisdiction only for Muslim personal law" (International Crisis Group 2010:5). The introduction of the Penal Code instead of the Sharia did not sit well with Muslims in the region who thought Christian laws were being elevated over Muslim laws (International Crisis Group 2010). Hence in 1999, some northern states demanded the return of the implementation of Sharia and its extension to criminal law (Human Rights Watch 2003). Although the law was intended to

apply only to Muslims in the region, Christians felt the law could affect them because of restrictions such as the prohibition of the sale or consumption of alcohol in some states and more importantly, the fear that Muslims would dominate Christians through the law (Human Rights Watch 2003). These fears led to protests by Christian groups in the region, further leading to violence that claimed many lives and property in places like Kaduna and Kano in 2000 (Human Rights Watch 2003; International Crisis Group 2010). Today, Christian-Muslim conflict remains a problem in northern Nigeria, exacerbated by the killings of Christians during the Boko Haram insurgency.

But while it is true that the underdevelopment of the economy and the resultant conflict in the north can be traced back to the colonial era, what efforts have northern leaders made to transcend these developmental challenges in the postcolonial period? To be sure, Nigeria is a *complex* country with corruption and poor leadership. But states in the south, despite these shortcomings, still fare much better than those in the north. Therefore, what has been the focus of northern political leaders in postcolonial Nigeria? What about education and development? How are northern leaders managing conflict and violence in the region?

At independence, northern leaders became increasingly concerned about the economic disparity between the north and the south and a perceived threat of southern dominance (Coleman 1958). Hence, they focused not only to catch up economically with the south but to dominate politically. One of the ways they set out to achieve this was through "Northernization," focusing on preserving the unity of the north under one Islamic identity and striving for a dominant position within a newly independent Nigeria (Loimeier 1997). They sought to achieve this goal under the Northern People's Congress (NPC), a dominant regional political party in

northern Nigeria at the time[9] (Coleman 1958; Kukah and Falola 1996; Loimeier 1997). Hence, they "sought to use their power in the Federal Government to 'catch up', concentrating the bulk of federal development spending (under the 1962-68 Development Plan) in the North. Almost all of the scheduled spending on defence, and much of that allocated for roads, health and education, was directed to the North" (Dudley 1966 in Diamond 1988:293).

Catching up and dominating continued to be the focus of northern leaders under regional political parties like the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the First Republic (1960-1979) and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in the Second Republic (1979-1983). In the Third Republic (1993-1999) and Fourth Republic (1999-present), political parties became less regional and more inter-regional and inter-ethnic, though voting patterns remain regional and ethnic (Babalola 2020). Today, the two dominant political parties in Nigeria are the All Progressives Congress (APC), the current ruling party, and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the main opposition party. The current president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, is a Muslim and northerner from the APC party while his vice president, Yemi Osinbajo is a Christian from southwestern Nigeria.

Regional and ethnic parties are harmful to nationalism since such parties are likely to focus on the progress of their regions rather than seeing themselves as part of a nation[10]. Hence, the types of political parties in the Fourth Republic are ideal for a nation because they are inclusive of different ethnic and religious identities. However, regional parties like those in the

[9] At independence, Nigeria had a federal structure that divided the country into three regions – northern, western, and eastern with each region having self-governing powers (Osaghae 1998). Hence, political parties were formed based on regional identities across the three regions, the Northern People's Congress in the Northern Region (NPC), the Action Group (AG) in the Western Region, and the National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), in the Eastern Region, for example.

[10] For example, in the case of the NPC in the northern region, the AG in the western region, and the NCNC in the eastern region.

First and Second Republics appeared to have a clear focus on the priorities of their regions and made efforts to actualize such priorities. For instance, northern leaders looked to improve the backward position of the north through Northernization during this period. Though, it is hard to measure the implementation and sustainability of such projects considering that the north is still in a disadvantaged position compared to the south.

Today, inter-ethnic and inter-religious political parties like the APC and the PDP still play the regional cards using ethnic and religious sentiments for campaigns and winning elections but pay less attention to the plight of the people who voted for them. For example, the 2015 presidential election saw overwhelming support for Buhari, a native of northern Nigeria (see Figure 5 showing the 2015 Nigeria presidential election in the Appendix). The election was based on a campaign to address the shortcomings of the incumbent administration of Goodluck Jonathan, who is from southern Nigeria. Jonathan's administration was "troubled by a weak economy, high corruption, and a badly worsening conflict with the Boko Haram extremist group based in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north" (Lee 2015). Nigerians voted for the Buhari administration with the hope that these issues will be effectively addressed. However, since 2015, Nigeria has been in a worse position, especially in the areas of the economy and security. In August 2022, for example, Bloomberg reported that "Nigeria's inflation rate climbed to a near 17-year high in July 2022, fueled by bread, cereal, gas and transport costs" (Olurounbi 2022). This implies that as the cost of living for the average Nigerian increases, it is likely to be worse for northerners who have continually been in a disadvantaged position in the country. Insecurity is also on the rise with Boko Haram in the north. Banditry and kidnappings, a "northern phenomenon," have now become a menace in the south as well (World Bank 2022). Therefore, the task for northern leaders is to have a clear agenda on how they plan to address the grievances

at the root of tensions and conflict in the region and improve the lives of many northerners that trust them with their votes. Education, security, employment, infrastructure, and other development plans should be their priority.

SECTION 4

CONCLUSION

In April 2014, Boko Haram attacked a community in northern Nigeria and kidnapped over 200 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State. While some of these girls have escaped and others freed, many are still missing today (BBC 2017). Incidences like these are common occurrences in northern Nigeria, where violence and conflict are prevalent. But such conflict occurrences are absent in southern Nigeria. Why is this the case? Scholars of religious diversity would say Nigeria is experiencing violence because it is religiously divided, where Christians and Muslims are in a contentious relationship over *religious* issues. While this observation is correct, as Nigeria is religiously diverse and experiences conflict, conflict is only restricted to the north of the country, and the south is relatively conflict-free. What explains this variation? My study attempts to answer this question and argues that while the conflict in northern Nigeria is often seen as "religious," religious explanations are insufficient in understanding the causes of the conflict because southern Nigeria is also religiously diverse, but Christians and Muslims coexist peacefully.

Further, I contend that the variation in conflict between the north and the south needs to be traced to different colonial histories and experiences relating to identity formation and economic development. Strong ethnoreligious Islamic identity formation in the north has made conflict in the region to be labeled "religious." I suggest that the presence of conflict in the north and its absence in the south goes back to colonial policies in trade, commerce, infrastructure development, and education in southern Nigeria, which were different from those in northern Nigeria, putting the south developmentally ahead of the north. Moreover, these colonial policies, I argue, *integrated* southerners into the colonial system, evident in the developmental progress in

the south and *isolated* northerners from the colonial system, visible in extreme poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and political instability in the north, which has increased grievances, leading to conflict in northern Nigeria and its absence in southern Nigeria.

While this study challenges the direct link between religious diversity and conflict, as the Nigerian case shows, this study may not be generalized to other religiously diverse contexts as individual contexts may differ and should be investigated individually. However, this study suggests that future studies on religiously polarized societies need to probe historical experiences (colonial history, for example) as one of the central factors explaining variation in conflict within the same country.

Also, the availability of more recent disaggregated data comparing socioeconomic conditions between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria would be beneficial for future studies, as recent data for economic conditions in the north and the south were unavailable for this study.

Finally, future research should also examine the conflict in northern Nigeria as an expression of agency, especially why some people choose conflict efforts and others peaceful efforts (for example, through non-governmental organizations) as a reaction to the uneven economic development created by colonial policies between northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria.

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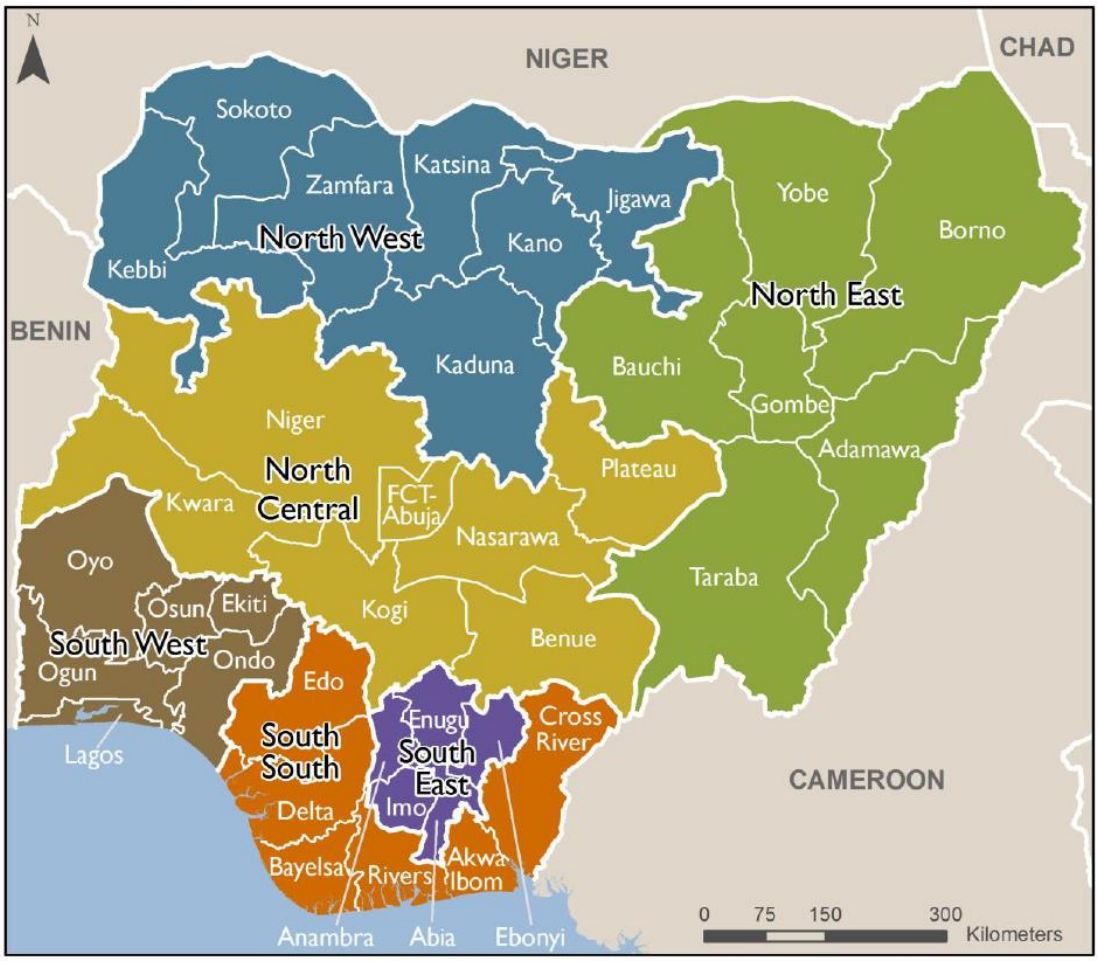
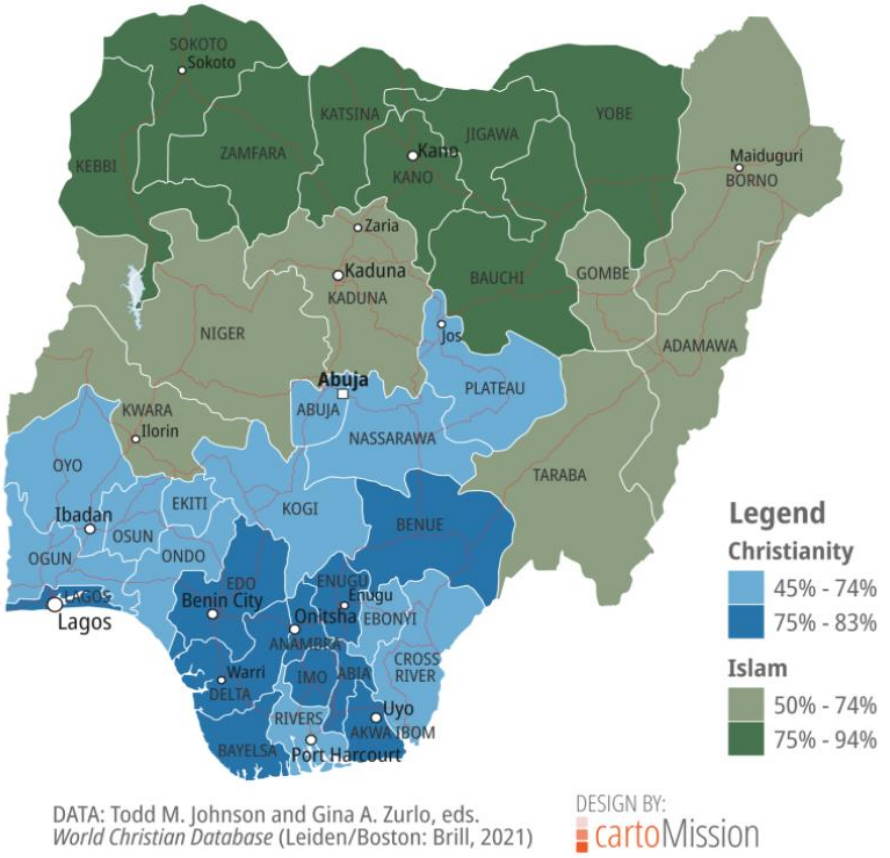
APPENDIX

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria



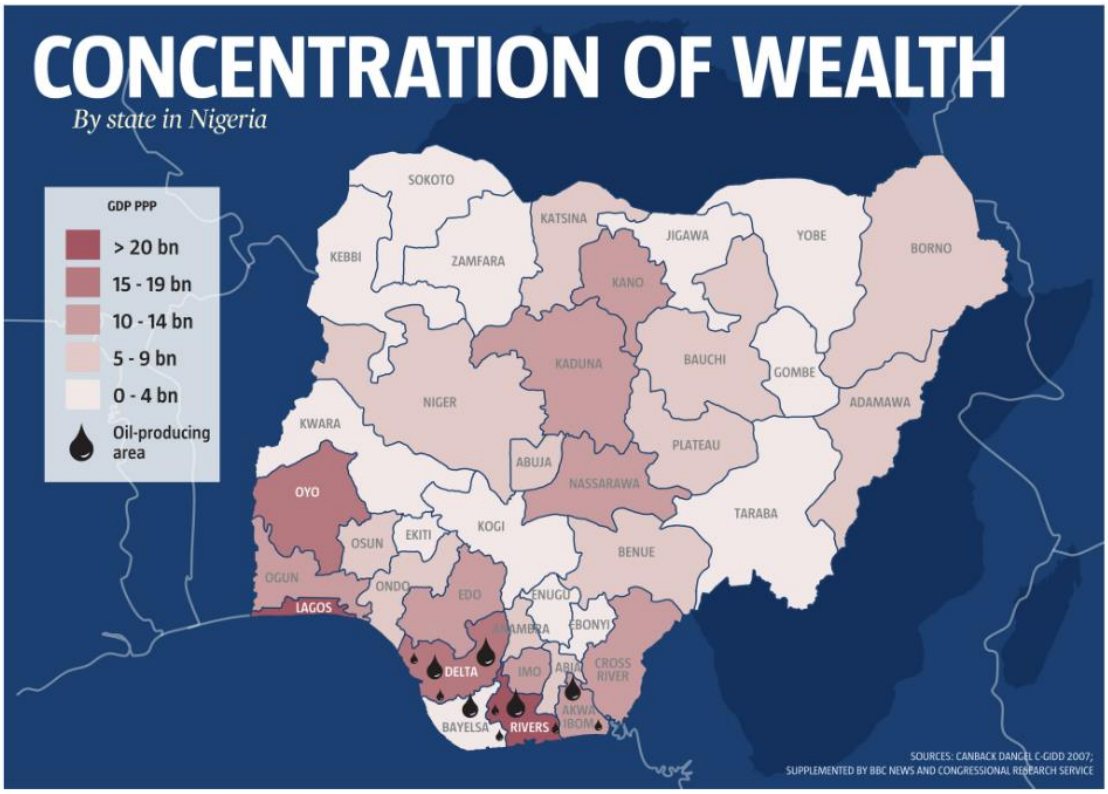
Source: National Population Commission 2018

Figure 2. Largest Religion by State



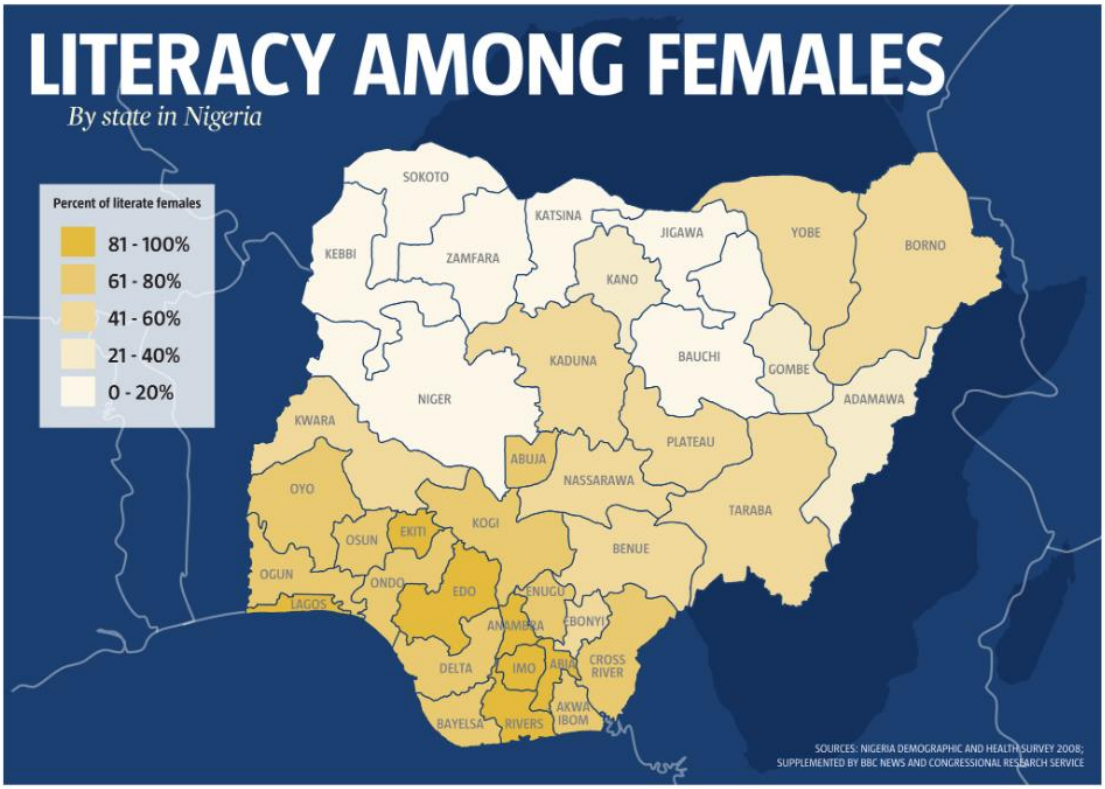
Source: cartoMission 2022

Figure 3. Concentration of Wealth by State in Nigeria



Source: Canback Dangel C-GIDD 2007; supplemented by BBC News and Congressional Research Service

Figure 4. Literacy among Females by State in Nigeria



Source: Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2008; supplemented by BBC News and Congressional Research Service

Figure 5. 2015 Nigeria Presidential Election

Source: Nigeriaelections.org 2022