

Causes of Strained Relationship among Christians, Muslims and African Traditional Religion Adherents in Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Globally, strained relationships among people from different religious backgrounds bring diverse negative consequences, and it is a concern for many people. While literature abounds on it, few have studied it from the perspective of the lived experiences of the people. Therefore, this study adopted the phenomenology method to study strained interreligious relationships in Osun State, Nigeria. The instrument for the study was an In-depth Interview Guide, and the interviews were conducted with 30 purposively selected respondents from Iwo and Ilesa West Local Government Areas of the State. The respondents comprised 15 religious clerics and 15 laity, among whom were eight African Traditional Religion adherents, 10 Christians, and 12 Muslims. The study revealed four groups of factors that explained causes of strained interreligious relationships: individual-based, government-based, religion-based, and community-based factors. Individual-based factors include religious stereotypes and the fear of communicating with adherents of other religions. Government-based factors include blurred legal boundaries for exercising religious rights and freedom, perceived religiously-biased legislation and policies, and discriminatory behaviours of some government workers. Religion-based factors include perceived inappropriate and harmful religious practices, and community-based factors include a lack of or ineffective community associations. The paper recommends a four-dimensional approach to mitigating strained interreligious relationships in the state.

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Introduction

The challenge of strained relationships among adherents of the different religious groups in Nigeria is the concern of this paper, and it is a global concern (Fahy, 2018; Gachanga & Mutisya, 2015). The United Nations (UN) also recognised it as a concern and a threat to global peace, making it an important subject in scholarship and practice, across the globe (Haynes, 2018). The UN, in showing its commitment to stemming the tides of strained relationships among adherents of different religious groups, in 2004, unanimously adopted the promotion of interfaith dialogue as one of its resolutions. And in the following year, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) was founded, with an overarching goal of neutralising the clash of civilisations (reducing conflicts and tensions) existing between the predominantly Christian Western nations and the Islamic nations (Haynes, 2018). The whole world, it seems, has come to realise that promoting peaceful co-existence among people from different religious backgrounds is key to stemming the tide of radicalisation, violent extremism and ideologically motivated acts of violence (Atang, 2019; Doe, 2016; Gachanga & Mutisya, 2015; Krebs, 2015).

The consequences of such strained interreligious relationships are grave and diverse. As experienced in Nigeria, for example, during the Maitasine riots of Kano, the Jos and Kaduna crises, the lingering Boko Haram insurgency, the hijab crises in Osun State, and the clash between African Traditional Adherents and Muslims in Osun State as examples, strained interreligious relationship leads to loss of lives and properties, forced migration and internal displacement, disruptions in socio-economic activities, and political instability, among other negative consequences (Abubakre, 2018; Bamigbola, 2021a, 2021b; Mamza, 2018; Onapajo & Usman, 2015). The lingering suspicion and non-violent prejudicial dispositions of different religious adherents towards one another also bring a lot of setbacks to individual, community, national and global progress, because without peace, progress cannot thrive.

Efforts geared towards curbing the rising tide of strained interreligious relationships in Nigeria are increasing. The government, religious bodies, interreligious bodies, faith-based Civil Society Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (local and international) often organise events to facilitate interreligious dialogue, and they also organise interventions to mediate between warring religious groups (Atang, 2019). As Roelofs (2020a)

reported, international agencies working in conjunction with local organisations to curb the challenge of strained interreligious relationships in Nigeria include Peace Direct, the Swiss-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the United States Institute for Peace. This study on the causes of strained interreligious relationships, therefore, promises to serve as vital resource to these local organisations and their international counterparts seeking solutions to religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Review of Relevant Literature

Literature abounds on strained interreligious relationships, and some of them that are relevant to this study are reviewed. In Southeast Asia, Riddell (2018) reported that Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia had been relating suspiciously with one another since the 15th century. This suggests that a suspicious relationship between adherents of different religions has not just started, though the trend is now alarming. In Africa, Hock and Hock (2008) noted that the quality of Christian Muslim relationships varies widely across different societies. While there is peaceful co-existence in some places, there are strained relationships in others, suggesting that no one-size-fits-all approach can be used to address the challenge of strained interreligious relationships in the African context. In Cameroon, Nshom, Tovivich, and Sadaf (2020) conducted a study to assess the relationship between self-identified Christian youths and Muslims.

The study, contrary to the expectation of the researchers, found that the more the Christian youths had contact with Muslims, the more they had a feeling of prejudice towards them. This finding buttresses the earlier findings of Hock and Hock (2008) stating that the quality of Christian-Muslim relations varies across Africa. In the West, studies on strained interreligious relationships are often woven around prejudicial behaviours of the White, predominantly Christian, majority against the Muslims and other religious minority groups (Abrams et al., 2018; Williams, 2019).

In Nigeria, Onapajo and Usman (2015) used secondary data to explore the trajectory of deterioration that the Christian-Muslim relationship is experiencing in Nigeria. He concluded that the activities of Boko Haram, and the acclaimed Islamic sect, are contributing in no small measure to the deterioration. He posited, based on in-depth analysis of the injunctions of the Quran and the activities of the Boko Haram sect, that the groups are enemies of both Muslims and Christians, and recommended that the two major religious groups should unite to fight them instead of fighting one another because of them. In the same vein, previous studies on strained interreligious relationships in Nigeria have focused on crises emanating from unpleasant interreligious interactions and efforts to resolve them (Abubakre, 2018; Basedau et al., 2013; Kilani, 1996; Mamza, 2018; Nnabuihe, 2019; Nweke, 2018; Ojo & Lateju, 2010; Roelofs, 2020b), with little attention paid to empirical analysis of the causes of the strained relationship.

The objective of this study is to empirically analyse the causes of strained interreligious relationships in Osun State, Nigeria, based on primary data sourced from people who have experienced it. While many studies have explored strained interreligious relationships, those that adopted this study's approach are scanty; the majority rely on secondary data, especially the media reports. While relying on secondary data is not out of place, we believe that drawing conclusions from primary data is what is needed more in addressing the challenge of strained interreligious relationships because it provides a deeper and more robust context-based understanding of strained interreligious relationships. Such robust empirical primary data from people's experiences of strained interreligious relationships can be useful in driving evidence-based intervention either by the government or donor agencies, and it can also be used as a framework for further scientific inquiry into the subject. Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative design, using the phenomenology method, to gather primary data on the lived experiences of people involved in interreligious conflicts.

Method

The Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative design, using the phenomenology method. The study's goal was to explore the lived experiences of Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion adherents in Osun State, in order to draw out the causes of religion-based strained relationships among them. Phenomenology was considered appropriate for the study because it is a widely used qualitative research approach that is concerned with exploring the lived experiences of people from the first-person point of view in order to produce a thick description of the phenomenon, which could be a belief, an attitude or an experience (Dixon & Turner, 2018; Ellis, 2016; Greening, 2019; Harrison, 2014; Tam, 2016).

Study Area

This study was carried out in Osun State, Southwest Nigeria, which lies between latitudes 7° 00' N to 8° 15' N and longitudes 4° 00' E to 5° 15' E (Adebayo, Ariyibi, Dasho, Adenika, & Olagunju, 2021) covering approximately 14,575 square kilometres (Adejimi et al., 2017). The National Bureau of Statistics puts the population of Osun State at 3,416,959, based on the 2006 census figures. However, as of 2016, the population of the State was estimated to be 4,705,589. The State has 30 local government areas, with residents who are mainly traders, artisans, and farmers. Yorubas are

predominant in the State, though there are residents from other tribes, and a few expatriates. Religion-wise, many residents of Osun State practice Islam, Christianity, or African Traditional Religion. Osun State has many notable religious clerics as residents and natives, and it has many notable religious institutions and monuments (*History | State of Osun Official Website*, 2020).

Study Population

The population for this study was adults (aged 18 years and above, as 18 years is the recognised legal youth age in Nigeria) who were residents in Osun State, South-West Nigeria. While both children and adults relate with people from other religions, children were excluded from the study because adults' interreligious relations in Osun state are usually strained, leading to conflicts and crises in the State. Children are more often than not victims of ethno-religious crises and not among the perpetrators (Iheriohanma, 2010; Mamza, 2018; Ononogbu, 2017).

Sampling and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was used for the study. The researcher purposively selected 30 respondents. The criteria for inclusion in the study was that the respondents must have had lived experiences of strained relationships with other religious adherents among the residents, and they must be willing to share the experiences of strained interreligious relationships in-depth, without reservations, though anonymously. Residents who did not have lived experiences of strained interreligious relationships and those who were not willing to share their experiences of strained interreligious relationships were not included in the study. The sample size (30) was consistent with the tradition for phenomenological studies, which is usually between 6 and 20 people (Ellis, 2016). The study. The study sample consisted of 10 Christians, 12 Muslims, and eight African Traditional Religion adherents. Eleven of the participants were from Iwo Local Government Area, while 19 were from Ilesa West Local Government Area of Osun State.

Table 1: Analysis of the Demography of the Interviewees

Variables	Demography of Characteristics	Frequency	Percentages
Gender of the respondents	Male	16	60
	Female	14	40
	Total	30	100
Age of the respondents	Below 35 years	15	50
	Above 35 years	15	50
	Total	30	100

Religion of the respondents	African Traditional Religion	8	26.67
	Christianity	10	33.33
	Islam	12	40
	Total	30	100
Town of the respondents	Iwo	11	36.67
	Ilesa	19	63.33
	Total	30	100
Status of the respondents in their religion	Leader/Clergy/Priest	15	50
	Follower/Laity	15	50
	Total	30	100

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork

Data Collection

This section explains how the qualitative data were collected. The research assistants suggested the names of people whom the researcher could interview based on the criteria stipulated. The criteria were that the respondents should have a lived experience of interreligious interactions, which they are willing to share. After agreeing on the list of people to be included in the qualitative study, the research assistants met the people, explained the purpose of the study to them, and sought their consent to participate. After giving their consent, the names and phone numbers of the willing prospective respondents were forwarded to the researcher, and he called them over to book an appointment for the interview. At the scheduled date and time, the interview was conducted over the telephone. Consistent with the phenomenological traditions, all the interview sessions started with rapport building between the researcher and the interviewees. The researcher reiterated the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. Because the respondents were recruited through the research assistants with whom they had a good rapport (for Christians and Muslim respondents) and through trusted ATR clerics (in the case of ATR adherents), they quickly built trust in the researcher, and the conversations over the phenomenon flowed freely. Open-ended questions from the semi-structured in-depth interview guide and other questions that emerged during the dialogue were answered by the respondents. Because the respondents were aware that the conversation was being recorded, sometimes they sought permission not to have some portions of the conversations recorded, and the researcher obliged. The interview sessions usually ended with words of appreciation from the researcher.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data (interview narratives) were transcribed by the researcher and translated where necessary. After the narratives were thoroughly examined, codes were generated on the document to describe the coded portions succinctly. The codes were then transferred from the narrative sheet to another document, where they were re-examined critically, aligned/merged, and re-categorised for the themes projected by the narratives. The core themes that emerged were grouped to answer the research question, which was what strains interreligious relationships among Christians, Muslims and African Traditional Religion adherents in Osun State, Nigeria.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher ensured strict adherence to high ethical standards in the conduct of the study. First, participation in the study was voluntary. It was without force, coercion, or deception, and participants were free to leave the study at any point in time without providing any reason for such and without any consequences. Two, informed consent of the participants was sought before they were enlisted for the study. In addition, the confidentiality of the personal information and classified information collected during the interview for the qualitative study was ensured. Lastly, on adherence to strict ethical standards, the researchers ensured that the research did no harm. The researcher got written Police permission to carry out the study. This was done to protect all the persons involved in the research, because at that time, in Osun State, cases of alleged apprehended kidnappers were rampant. Also, to prevent social harm, both Christian and Muslim (male and female) research assistants were recruited for the study. This step was taken to ensure that religious ethics were respected and the research assistants were protected.

Results and Discussion

Exploring the causes of strained relationships among Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion adherents in Nigeria was the goal of this study. It adopted a phenomenological method where 30 participants were recruited to discuss their experiences of interreligious interaction, and from their descriptions of their experiences, themes were drawn to answer the study's research question. The answer to the research question is grouped into three: individual-based causes, government-based causes, and religion-based causes. While the causes may work as standalone strain-causing factors, they can also work together to cause strained relationships.

Individual-based Causes of Strained Interreligious Relationships

The findings of this study show that some of the factors affecting the quality of interreligious relationships among the residents are individual-based. These

factors include interreligious knowledge, intrareligious knowledge, interreligious communication apprehension, and interreligious friendship. Specifically, the findings suggest that the more knowledgeable the residents are in the beliefs and ethics of other people's religions, the more favourably disposed they are to the adherents, the more tolerant they are of their religious practices, and the less prejudicial they are towards them. Consequently, interreligious knowledge positively impacts interreligious relationship quality. For instance, a respondent who had witnessed an interreligious tension over a lack of interreligious knowledge narrated her experience. She said:

In a school hostel, the person at the upper bunk was a Christian while the person at the lower bunk was a Muslim. So, one day, at a time the Muslim at the lower bunk spread the praying mat to pray, the Christian at the upper bunk wanted to come down from the bed... It became a serious problem. (*IDI, Female, 43 years, Christian cleric, Iwo L.G., 2022*)

The challenge was obviously due to the Christian's lack of knowledge of what stepping on the praying mat meant to his Muslim bunkmate. When there is adequate interreligious knowledge, there is tolerance and peaceful coexistence. This assertion is well captured in the narrative of a respondent. He said:

I once lived in the same hostel with Muslims... When I was praying and they were around, I didn't use my prayer to disturb them, and when they too wanted to pray or play Islamic songs, they didn't use them to disturb me... we endured with ourselves because there was understanding. (*IDI, Male, 25 years, Christian, Iwo L.G., 2022*)

In addition to interreligious knowledge, the findings also showed that the deeper the knowledge of residents is about their own religion (intrafaith knowledge), the more harmoniously they lived with adherents of different religions. The majority of the respondents believed that those who foment religious troubles have shallow knowledge of the faith that they profess. This opinion was held across the three religions' adherents involved in this study (ATR adherents, Christians and Muslims). They believed that the more knowledgeable one is in their faith beliefs and practices, the more pious one becomes, and consequently, the more tolerant one becomes of other people's excesses. For instance, a Muslim respondent said:

People who don't have an understanding of their religious tenets are the ones causing trouble. If you see a Muslim that is fighting Christians because the person is not a Muslim, tell the person that he/she should go back to the Quranic school. And, any Christian that you see that is fighting Muslims because they are not Christians, tell them to go back to church to restudy their Bible. (*IDI, Male, Below 35 years, Islamic cleric, Iwo L.G., 2022*)

Interreligious friendship is another individual factor that influenced the quality of interreligious relationships among the residents. Residents who had friends among adherents of other religions enjoyed quality relationships with them: celebrating religious festivals together, performing social functions together, assisting one another, and generally having a good time. Also, such residents are able to separate the fanatics among the adherents of the religions of their friends, perhaps because they have knowledge of the non-fanatical tenets of the religion. Even when they reported that their friends in other religions have excesses, they did not report that such led to misunderstanding or destroyed their relationships. This implies that the cord of friendship is strong enough to resist the pull-apart effect of fanatical beliefs and religious excesses. Buttressing this finding are the two quotes below from two Muslim participants:

I have pleasant relationships with Christians... I have them among my family members and I have them as friends in my neighborhood.... They come and celebrate with me during Ramadan festival and during Eid-el-Kabir, and I join them to celebrate Christmas. (*IDI, Male, 32 years, Muslim, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

... I am living in Ilesa here, there is a church beside my house, a Cherubim and Seraphim Church. The prophet there is my intimate friend and we do assist ourselves freely... One day they needed electricity, and they tapped it from my house. On another day, I too needed something and I got it from them free of charge. (*IDI, Male, Above 35 years, Islamic cleric, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

The finding of this study that interreligious friendship improves interreligious relationship quality agrees with the findings of earlier studies in intergroup relations and intercultural communication that affirm that intergroup and intercultural friendship improves relationships (Gareis et al., 2011; 2019).

Furthermore, interreligious communication apprehension is another individual-based factor that demotes interreligious relationship quality among the residents. interreligious communication apprehension is a form of fear or anxiety expressed by communicants in interreligious communication contexts. As earlier studies have found, apprehension in communicating with outgroups has negative attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, such as those the Christians and Muslims allegedly showed towards ATR adherents. For instance, ATR adherents complained of Christians' and Muslims' inappropriate actions, which include refusal to have ATR adherents sit beside them in public transport/vehicle, refusal to stand to pray together with ATR adherents in public functions, break of love relationships with ATR members, and refusal to enter the house of an ATR member or take a meal from them. An ATR adherent narrated her ordeal thus:

There was a day that I travelled, so I was coming and I wanted to board a vehicle. So, one passenger said I should not sit beside him. I said what happened and he said it is because of the way I dressed (the person wore *sutana* (white regalia and I wore black and red attire as an Osun adherent). The person shouted at me and I was embarrassed. (*IDI, Female, 25 years, ATR cleric, Ilesa West L.G, 2022*)

Even at the place of work, an ATR priestess was always suspected by a Christian fellow worker. She said:

Everywhere I worked, I am given the honour because they know that I am an ATR cleric... But where I work presently, there is someone there (a Christian); if you do one thing he will call, "blood of Jesus." Before you say another thing, he will say, "blood of Jesus." This Friday, we fought... we shared food and he was not there and as he came, I told him, "gentleman take your food this is it (it's bread, not a serious food). He collected the bread and returned it to the table, and I flared up and said "I now know today that you harbour evil intent in your heart..." (*IDI, Female, 48 years, ATR cleric, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

The actions of non-ATR adherents towards the ATR adherents are negative communication, verbal and non-verbal, that are propelled by fear, which the

intercultural communication literature has captured as intercultural communication apprehension (Ma & Hample, 2018; Wrench et al., 2006).

Government-based Causes of Strained Interreligious Relationships

The second group of factors that explained the interreligious relationship quality among the residents was categorised as a government-based factor. They were labelled as such because they relate to government legislation, government policies, and the practices of government workers. The first factor in this category is perceived religiously-biased legislation and policies; the second one is religious discrimination by government workers, and the third one is blurred legal boundaries of religious adherents. Explanation of these three factors follows. The majority of the respondents in this study, across all three religions (ATR, Christianity, and Islam), either perceived the government as being unconcerned with the state of interreligious relationship quality in the state or perceived the government as contributing to its deterioration. The government was considered to have no policy that helps interreligious relationships, and at best pays lip service to its promotion in the state. ATR adherents complained of marginalisation in the political affairs of the state and the nation. They complained of not being considered for political offices (alleging that the positions are said to be only for Christians and Muslims). The respondents also complained of ATR adherents not being given public holidays to worship God, as the government gives many holidays to Christians and Muslims. The way the government treats ATR adherents negatively impacts the way adherents of other religions treat and communicate with them, in the ATR adherents' views. One of them said,

When they wanted to choose the Vice-President (of Nigeria), now, they are saying they must choose one Christian and one Muslim. Do they remember ATR adherents? Yet, we too are voting, but they don't remember us. But if there is problem, they will remember us. (*IDI, Male, 50 years, ATR cleric, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

Many Christians who participated in the study considered Governor Aregbesola's policy that paved the way for and sustained the use of Hijab in public schools in Osun State as a religiously-biased policy that has sustained a negative impact on interreligious relationship quality in the state. Their argument was based on the fact that earlier governments had set policies governing the schools and their approved uniforms, and there was no need to review the policies if not for a religiously-biased motive. Contrariwise, Muslims who participated in the study considered government policy on Hijab as fair and unbiased, though they also observed that it has a negative impact on interreligious relationship quality in the state. Their argument was based on the

fact that since the government had taken over the school from their founders, the founding tenets of the school should be subject to change. Moreover, they considered the agitations against the policy as uncalled for and such that should be stemmed by the government. While Hijab use in Osun State-owned schools has come to stay, it is observed that its impact on strained interreligious relationships lingers, too. As one of the participants opines,

If a religious sect is suspecting that the government is favouring one religion over theirs, it will cause bitterness. Such an angry group can begin to gather (to express their grievances), and such a gathering can lead to anything, even such a gathering can lead to war. (*IDI, Male, Above 35 years, Islamic cleric, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

Religious discrimination among government workers is another factor that negatively impacts the quality of interreligious relationships in Osun State, which is categorised as government-based in this study. ATR adherents complained of being discriminated against by Muslims and Christians who did not understand their practices. For instance, ATR clerics found it difficult to put sacrifices on the road junctions for the oracles, and when they used animal blood for sacrifice, they were misconstrued as murderers and/or ritualists by Muslim and Christian security operatives. Transporting concoction pots for rituals in their vehicles also attracted the wrath of Christian and Muslim personnel in the security agencies. They were sometimes accused of harbouring criminals in their neighbourhood by government detectives. All these discriminations had a negative impact on the image of ATR adherents and clerics in the eyes of the public and consequently affected the way they are perceived. An ATR cleric narrated an ordeal that captures this finding. He said:

There was a day I was coming from Ibadan to Osun state.... and the police stopped us... the man (one of the police officers) just ordered us to open the boot of the car (and the boot contained about twenty pots of concoction). He didn't ask any question about what were inside the concoction pots, as he sighted them, he said, "ehn, you these 419 people... we have been telling you to give your life to Christ..." I came down from the car, I went to him, I said, "you are a very stupid, young man." (*IDI, Male, 35 years, ATR cleric, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

Muslim subordinates complained of being discriminated against and being forced to join Christian fellowship and prayer meetings at work. Muslim women who used long Hijabs faced mounting pressure from their Christian bosses to use a “moderately long” one (covering only the neck). Christians also had their share of discrimination by government workers. They were discriminated against by Muslim bosses who work against their promotion, because of their religion. Some Christian students were reportedly being forced to wear a Hijab in schools dominated by Muslims. All these religiously motivated discriminatory behaviours hamper interreligious relationship quality in the state.

Besides perceived biased legislation and religiously induced discriminatory behaviours of government workers, the researcher also found that the boundaries to the right of religious adherents in a multireligious interaction context, as it is in the state, seem to be blurred. While such boundaries exist in law, it is not certain if religious adherents in the state are aware of them. The researcher came to this conclusion because of what two interviewees, both Muslims, narrated as factors that negatively impact interreligious relationship quality in the state.

The first person, a woman, declined to adjust her Hijab to reveal her ear to take an official passport that required a full capture of her face. According to her, some other women who used Hijab on the occasion adjusted theirs, but she and some others insisted that it was not religiously right for them to do so. As the story went, they eventually took the official passport for them without adjusting their Hijab to reveal their ears. Another interviewee narrated that if a social function is being held near where Muslims are praying, and the noise interferes with the prayer, there may be trouble, as they are being disturbed from doing their religious act of service appropriately, as instructed by the Al-Quran.

The two interviewees were sincere and were not troublemakers. Thus, the researcher got thinking, “at what point does the law say a religious adherent should stop pushing for the demands of her/his religion to be met in a multireligious setting? Does any law stipulate a limit to the extent to which religious adherents can push for their religious beliefs and practices to be respected and accommodated by adherents of other religions? If the laws exist, do residents know them? Can Nigeria’s multireligious interreligious relations context accommodate adjustment to the peculiarities of every religion? If not, how do we negotiate the boundaries to map out limits for each religious group?”

Where there are no boundaries, there are no limits to how far a religious group can push other religious groups to adjust to their demands. And, when others are being continually pushed to shift grounds, resentment may build up, and interreligious relationships may break down. Hence, this researcher considered the blurred legal religious adherents’ right boundaries as a major

factor that negatively impacts the quality of interreligious relationships in Osun state, which needs to be addressed.

Religion-based Causes of Strained Interreligious Relationships

The third category of factors that explained the quality of interreligious relationships among the residents is labelled religion-based factors. These factors are peculiar to each of the three religions. They are negative religious stereotypes, incompatible religious beliefs, and incompatible religious practices. The three factors negatively impact the quality of interreligious relationships among the residents. Explanation of them follows.

Negative religious stereotypes against a religious group are preconceived negative labels that other religious adherents place on the group members, and expect them to justify. Often, because judgments about people's behaviour in a communication context are socially constructed, preconceived negative labels affect the way people judge and adjust to each other during a communication context. For instance, a Christian respondent described Muslims as a group of people who believe in fighting, causing trouble, and killing people. An ATR adherent among the respondents accused Christians and Muslims of seeing them as idol worshippers, while she believed they are worshipping the same God as other religious groups, albeit in a different way. A Muslim cleric referred to ATR adherents and Christians as those who have lost the path to God. An ATR adherent referred to Muslims and Christians as people who have been brainwashed by strange and foreign religions. All these internalised negative stereotypes cause strained interreligious relationships and need to be addressed. A narrative that explained the impact of stereotypes was given by one of the participants, thus:

There was a day that I was going among several people, and a man, who I didn't know at all, upon seeing my plenty beard, exclaimed, "Eh! Here comes a Boko Haram member," and I also exclaimed in reply, "Here comes a member of the Niger-Delta boys..." and each of us gently went our ways afterwards. (*IDI, Male, 35 years, Muslim, Ilesa West L.G., 2022*)

Besides negative stereotypes, there are also a number of incompatible religious beliefs and practices that negatively impact the quality of interreligious relationships among the studied residents. First, the incompatible beliefs will be discussed, and then the incompatible practices.

ATR adherents believed that in the three religions (ATR, Christianity and Islam) the same God (Olodumare) is the God who is worshipped. However, Christians and Muslims do not agree on that. Christianity and Islam are Abrahamic-oriented religions, and their adherents believe that their God is superior to and can exercise control over the smaller gods that the ATR adherents are worshipping. Since it goes that the status of the head rubs off on the followers, it implies that if the Gods of Christianity and Islam are superior to the Gods of the ATR, then Christians and Muslims are “superior” to ATR adherents. Again, Christians and Muslims have different views of the supremacy of their Gods. Allah, the God in Islam, is different from the triune God in Christianity. While Christians hold the view that Allah is no God but an idol in Arabia, Muslims hold the view that the triune God is a product of human reasoning, as one God cannot be three. When communicants go into intergroup or interreligious communication contexts with inferior or superior thinking about their status in relation to the other person, communication usually does not go well, because wrong assessment of people does not promote right adjustments during communication with them. That is real in the context of interreligious communication among the residents. The residents reported a show of superiority complex, especially by Christians and Muslims who believe they are affiliated with a superior God/Allah that is greater than the Gods of the ATR adherents.

Incompatible religious practices also negatively impact the quality of interreligious relationships among the residents. For instance, Christians do face-to-face neighbourhood evangelism, sharing their religious beliefs with people. They also stage open-air crusades and religious events to pass their religious messages across to every hearer. This practice of publicly sharing faith and the consequences of not being a Christian is not compatible with ATR beliefs, as revealed by the respondents. ATR adherents do not overtly shop for converts the way that Christians and Muslims do. Furthermore, Christians pray and sing aloud. This is not compatible with Islamic religious practices. It was even said that Muslims do not want to rent out their houses to Christians because they will be disturbing them with prayers. Muslims also hang a public address speaker outside their mosques to call people to come and pray during the prayer hours. Christians and ATR adherents do not like the “noise” made by Muslims, especially early in the morning. Also, Muslims pray in the Arabic language, which Christians and ATR adherents do not understand. These incompatible practices, among others, negatively impact interreligious relationship quality and, consequently, generate tension in interreligious relationships sometimes.

Community-based Causes of Strained Interreligious Relationships

Finally, the study found that a lack of community association or ineffective community associations might be a cause of strained interreligious relationships in the State. The conclusion was drawn because the study found

that community-based organisations provide a platform for different religious adherents to collaborate for the execution of community projects and meet regularly for discussions. As the respondents pointed out, community meetings provided avenues for them to learn from the worldviews, beliefs, and practices of different religious adherents. It provided the opportunity for calling erring community members who wanted to foment religious troubles to order. Besides, through involvement in community projects, adherents of different religions have the opportunity to build trust and friendship, which positively impacted the quality of interreligious relationships. Community meetings provided opportunities for storytelling (which is central to the process of building and maintaining the community) that positively impact the quality of interreligious relationships.

Conclusion

This paper, drawing from the lived experiences of residents of Osun State, Nigeria, has presented causes of strained interreligious relationships among Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion adherents. The descriptions of the causes contained in the paper are to provide insight into the problem of strained interreligious relationships in the State. The paper adopted a qualitative design approach in which the study's respondents were drawn purposively; therefore, care must be taken in generalising the findings either to the State or to Nigeria, though it is a good reflection of the nation's interreligious relationship realities. Going further, the researchers recommend that the findings of this study should be used as springboards for further studies on the subject of strained interreligious relationships in Nigeria, which is currently threatening the peace and security of the nation. Such studies could be conducted in other states of the southwest, Nigeria, or other geopolitical zones, and they may also adopt other methods of design, especially the mixed-method design. Besides researchers, government agencies, religious bodies, and national and international Non-governmental Organisations could leverage on the findings of this study to deepen their understanding of the causes of strained interreligious relationships in Nigeria and use it to guide the framing and execution of their interventions to curb it.

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