

CULTURAL VALUES AS GATEWAY TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a culturally diverse nation with a complex religious landscape dominated by Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATR). Interreligious tensions have often plagued national cohesion, yet within this diversity lie deeply rooted cultural values that emphasise respect, hospitality, and communal living. Sustainable interreligious dialogue cannot be achieved until shared values are recognised and harnessed. This descriptive research relies heavily on secondary sources, such as books, articles, magazines, newspapers (both print and online), and commentaries written on the subject matter. The paper identifies the vital role of recognising cultural values as a foundation for interreligious dialogue. The study begins with a conceptual clarification of cultural values and interreligious dialogue, highlighting how these concepts intersect within a framework of mutual respect and unity in diversity. It identifies key cultural values, such as the sense of the sacred, respect for elders, community spirit, common moral grounds, hospitality, justice, and solidarity, and critically demonstrates how these values align with core religious tenets. For instance, the sacred is central to all three traditions—God in Christianity and Islam, and the divine in ATR—while respect for elders and hospitality are highly esteemed in both Islamic and Christian teachings, as well as in traditional African ethics. Justice and solidarity reflect the prophetic traditions in Christianity and Islam, and the communal ethos of ATR. These parallels affirm that cultural values are not only integral to societal cohesion but also echo the foundational principles of diverse religious beliefs. Despite the challenges that may be encountered, the paper contends that recognising such values enables inclusive dialogue, combats religious and cultural marginalisation, facilitates more profound understanding and cooperation, and is indispensable to achieving a gateway to a more inclusive, respectful, and harmonious national religious landscape.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Values, Inter-religious Dialogue, Unity, and Inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria stands at the intersection of cultural plurality and religious complexity. Simultaneously, the sacred space is shared by three dominant faiths:

Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATR). Despite decades of coexistence, ethno-religious tensions have escalated into violent conflicts, particularly in the Middle Belt and northern regions (Falola, 1998: 2). In a country characterised by religious diversity and sociocultural complexity, the need for effective interreligious engagement is more urgent than ever. The recognition of cultural values—those shared beliefs, customs, and social behaviours that define a community—can be a powerful tool for fostering mutual respect among religious traditions. The interplay between cultural values and religious identity plays a critical role in promoting interreligious dialogue. The central thesis of this paper is that recognising and respecting indigenous cultural values offers a vital pathway for achieving interreligious dialogue and mutual respect. Rather than focusing solely on religious doctrines, engaging through shared cultural ethos creates a less confrontational platform for dialogue. The recognition and integration of cultural values can thus foster tolerance, social harmony, and national integration for the peaceful coexistence of diverse faith traditions.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Cultural Values

Culture is the totality of a people's way of life, encompassing language, norms, morals, laws, customs, and institutions (Taylor, 1871). Cultural values refer to the shared principles and standards regarded as desirable and acceptable by a group (Hofstede, 2001). In the Nigerian context, values such as respect for elders, communalism, hospitality, and tolerance are widespread across ethnic and religious divides. For our purpose, we could say a value is simply a principle or standard of behaviour and/or one's judgement of what is essential in life. The adjective "cultural," which qualifies the noun "value", lets us understand that here we are dealing with principles that constitute the way of life of a people.

Inter-Religious Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue is an exchange that takes place between two or more religions. Also referred to as interfaith dialogue, it is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate despite their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional levels. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practise their faith freely (Ajibola, 2013:17).

In other words, interreligious dialogue refers to intentional and respectful engagement among individuals and communities belonging to different religious traditions. It encompasses a range of communicative and cooperative practices aimed at fostering mutual understanding, reducing religious prejudices, and promoting peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies. More than mere conversation, interreligious dialogue is a dynamic process of encounter that seeks to build bridges across theological and cultural divides, acknowledging both the distinctiveness and the shared values of participating faiths.

According to the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (1991), this engagement takes four principal forms: the dialogue of life, wherein people of different faiths live together in open and neighbourly interaction; the dialogue of action, which involves collaboration on social, ethical, and humanitarian issues of common concern; the dialogue of theological exchange, where scholars and religious leaders engage in deeper intellectual and doctrinal conversations; and the dialogue of religious experience, which focuses on sharing spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplation, and worship. Each form of dialogue contributes to deepening trust, enhancing religious literacy, and reinforcing the moral and spiritual foundations necessary for cohesive multicultural societies.

In contexts such as Nigeria, where religious diversity is both a source of richness and occasional tension, interreligious dialogue plays a crucial role in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and national development. It enables adherents of different traditions to appreciate one another's beliefs and values while working collaboratively toward common goals rooted in justice, compassion, and the dignity of the human person.

The Intersection of Culture and Religion

Religion and culture are intricately intertwined, each shaping and reinforcing the other in profound and enduring ways. Far from existing in isolation, religion is deeply embedded within the cultural contexts in which it is practised. Cultural values, symbols, language, and social structures profoundly influence religious beliefs, rituals, and expressions, while religion, in turn, legitimises and perpetuates cultural norms, ethical codes, and collective identities (Geertz, 1973: 87-125). This symbiotic relationship means that religious practices cannot be fully understood apart from the cultural frameworks that give them meaning and coherence.

In pluralistic societies such as Nigeria, where multiple religious and ethnic groups coexist, the intersection of culture and religion becomes a critical site for both harmony and tension. As such, any attempt at interreligious dialogue must be undergirded by cultural competence, defined as the ability to engage respectfully and

effectively with the cultural dimensions of others' faith traditions. Cultural competence involves not only knowledge of diverse cultural worldviews but also the capacity for empathetic listening, critical self-reflection, and the avoidance of ethnocentric assumptions. It enables dialogue that is both respectful and transformative, fostering mutual understanding, reducing prejudices, and building bridges across religious and cultural divides. Therefore, acknowledging and engaging in the cultural embeddedness of religion is essential for promoting genuine interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence in multicultural contexts.

SOME CULTURAL VALUES

There are so many cultural values in our society. These certainly serve as components of a fertile ground that promotes inter-religious dialogue to grow.

The sense of the sacred

The average African man tends to be religiously inclined. The sense of the sacred, deeply embedded in the cultural and religious consciousness of Nigerians, serves as a powerful tool for promoting interreligious dialogue. Across Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious landscape, the reverence for sacred spaces, symbols, rituals, and moral codes transcends specific religious affiliations, fostering mutual respect and shared values. Whether in Christianity, Islam, or traditional African religions, the sacred is associated with the divine, the moral order, and communal well-being—elements that resonate with all faiths. In African thought, the sacred is not confined to temples or formal religion but permeates daily life, relationships, and the environment. By acknowledging this shared reverence for the sacred, interreligious dialogue can move beyond doctrinal differences to emphasise mutual respect, spiritual connectedness, and the pursuit of harmony in pluralistic societies.

Respect for elders

Respect for elders is a deeply ingrained cultural value across Nigerian ethnic groups, reflecting their role as custodians of wisdom, tradition, and moral authority. Their extensive life experience grants them a holistic understanding of societal dynamics, making them vital contributors to interreligious dialogue. Elders offer insights that transcend religious boundaries, promoting shared values such as peace and coexistence. Including them in interfaith discussions lends credibility and ensures that dialogue is rooted in the ethical and historical foundations of the community.

Community Spirit

Communalism and solidarity are foundational pillars of social organisation in Nigerian cultures, deeply embedded in the moral and structural fabric of traditional life. Interpersonal relationships are usually the norm in most cultures. Across various ethnic groups, there exists a strong emphasis on collective identity and mutual responsibility, where the well-being of the individual is inherently tied to the welfare of the community. There is little room for individualism. Little wonder John Mbiti (1990:106) once aptly said: “I am because we are”. This reflects a true cultural spirit. Since no man is an island, people must depend on one another to progress in this challenging journey of life. No one is ever “self-made”. Whatever one becomes is a result of the effort and help of others.

Crucially, these communal practices often transcend religious affiliations, serving as neutral spaces where individuals of diverse faiths—be they Christian, Muslim, or adherents of African Traditional Religion—interact harmoniously. Participation in communal events fosters a sense of belonging and a shared purpose, which is essential for cultivating trust and mutual respect. In contexts marked by religious pluralism and potential conflict, such shared cultural frameworks can be instrumental in mitigating tensions and promoting dialogue.

Common Moral Grounds

Despite doctrinal and theological differences, most religious traditions converge on core moral principles such as hospitality, humility, compassion, and a commitment to the welfare of the vulnerable. These ethical imperatives are not only central to the sacred texts and teachings of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATR) but are also deeply embedded within Nigeria’s cultural heritage. Such shared values provide a vital ethical framework upon which interreligious dialogue and cooperation can be meaningfully built. Swidler (2014) emphasises that successful interfaith responses to global humanitarian challenges are often grounded in these universally resonant ethical commitments. Therefore, recognising and reinforcing these common moral values not only fosters empathy and mutual respect but also enables practical collaboration in addressing societal needs, thereby strengthening the prospects for sustained interreligious harmony and national cohesion.

Subsidiarity and solidarity

The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, though often articulated within socio-political and theological frameworks, are also deeply resonant as cultural values that support the mutual coexistence of diverse faiths in Nigeria. Subsidiarity,

which upholds the autonomy and competence of smaller communities or groups within a broader societal structure, reflects the respect for local religious traditions and communal identities that is characteristic of many Nigerian cultures. It discourages the imposition of one religious worldview over others by higher authorities—whether political or religious—and instead promotes dialogue that is rooted in mutual respect, local agency, and cultural authenticity.

Solidarity, meanwhile, underscores the interconnectedness of Nigeria's religious communities and the shared responsibility to work towards common goods such as peace, justice, and national development. This value fosters interfaith collaboration in addressing social issues like poverty, insecurity, and education, emphasising collective action over sectarian division. Together, these principles create a framework within which diverse religious groups can coexist harmoniously, recognising each other's uniqueness while committing to the shared goal of national unity and human flourishing. Their integration into interreligious dialogue enhances not only tolerance but also the proactive building of inclusive and empathetic relationships among Nigeria's multifaceted religious communities.

Justice

Pope Saint Paul VI (1972) famously asserted, "If you want peace, work for justice," highlighting the intrinsic link between the pursuit of justice and the attainment of lasting peace. Across various cultures, the principle of justice—understood as giving everyone their due—has served as a foundational value in guiding social conduct, legal systems, and conflict resolution mechanisms. While the implementation of justice remains uneven and often challenged by structural inequalities and human limitations, it is not an overstatement to assert that the pursuit of justice has significantly influenced the ethical frameworks and societal norms of numerous communities. In both religious and cultural traditions, justice is esteemed not merely as a legal imperative but as a moral virtue that upholds human dignity, promotes accountability, and seeks the restoration of harmony when relationships are fractured. Its continued relevance in shaping communal life underscores its critical role in fostering peaceful coexistence and mutual respect in pluralistic societies.

IMPORTANCE OF DEPLOYING CULTURAL VALUES FOR ENHANCING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The recognition of cultural values plays a pivotal role in fostering social harmony, mutual respect, and sustainable interreligious dialogue, particularly in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria. Cultural values serve as the moral and ethical

bedrock upon which communities build their identities and relationships. Acknowledging and integrating these values into interfaith engagements not only affirms the dignity of diverse traditions but also provides a common framework for cooperation, conflict resolution, and national integration.

Dialogue is always central in the relationships between religions. When someone engages another in dialogue, it shows that they value his/her interlocutor and recognise his/her dignity as a fellow human being created in the image and likeness of God. According to the *Directory for the application of principles and norms on ecumenism* (1993: 70), “Dialogue demands that there is listening and answering, that there is an effort to understand others and make others understand oneself. It signifies being disposed to interrogate and being open to being interrogated. It means communicating something of oneself and giving credit to what others say of themselves”. The Church’s bid to promote exchanges with others is thus helped immeasurably by this. Nothing good and tangible is achieved through a monologue. Everyone has the right to be listened to, and no one has a monopoly on speech.

Recognising cultural values ensures that everyone is carried along. It is a well-known fact that people always appreciate being made to feel a sense of belonging when they are included and carried along. The way to achieve this is by eliminating biases and stereotypes, ensuring that no one is left behind in the scheme of things or treated as a second-class citizen or human being. This greatly aids the Church in her search for unity among Churches and religions. The marginalisation of others in any form is detrimental to the common good.

Through recognition of its values, cultures are not seen as inferior: God created each of us equal. We possess diverse talents, but our dignity as human beings remains unchanged. When the cultural values of others are recognised, the feeling of inferiority disappears completely or is reduced to the barest minimum.

In addition, the recognition of the values of different cultures has led to the conversion of an incalculable number of people. It is a right for one to practice the religion he/she like without being constrained. Faith should be presented attractively so that people will be drawn to it. One way to achieve this is by recognising the beauty of every culture. Pope Francis, about making the faith attractive, states that “Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty, and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytising that the Church grows, but “by attraction” (Francis, 2013: 14).

CHALLENGES FOR USING CULTURAL VALUES TO ENHANCE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Despite the potential of cultural values to foster interreligious understanding and social cohesion, several challenges hinder their effective recognition and integration in contemporary dialogue processes. A few are examined below:

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Superiority

Religious groups may view their cultural norms as superior, leading to exclusion or proselytism. This attitude hinders genuine dialogue and often exacerbates conflicts (Abu-Nimer, 2001). As Yabiliyok (2021, 140) notes, supersessionism is not only a stumbling block but a cancer that decimates the goodwill capital of healthy interfaith relations. This aberration needs to be expunged from the texts of confessional religions; otherwise, conflicts become inevitable.

Politicisation of Culture

The politicisation of culture hinders genuine interreligious dialogue by turning cultural symbols—such as holidays, dress codes, and language—into tools for political agendas (Haynes, 2007). In diverse societies like Nigeria, this manipulation can deepen divisions and fuel sectarian tensions. To promote unity and inclusive dialogue, it is essential to depoliticise cultural expressions and reaffirm their role as shared human values rather than instruments of exclusion or ideological control.

Cultural Misinterpretation

A superficial or misguided understanding of another group's culture can lead to significant miscommunication, misrepresentation, or even unintended offence, thereby undermining the goals of interreligious or intercultural engagement. Cultural values are often deeply nuanced and context-specific; thus, their accurate interpretation requires more than cursory exposure. As Brock (2005) emphasises, meaningful cross-cultural understanding demands intentional learning, proper training, and, where possible, immersive experiences. Such efforts help individuals move beyond stereotypes and assumptions, fostering genuine empathy, respect, and effective dialogue.

CONCLUSION

In a nation as richly diverse as Nigeria, where cultural and religious plurality coexist with periodic tensions, the recognition of cultural values emerges as a powerful instrument for fostering interreligious dialogue, peace, and national

integration. This paper has demonstrated that values such as respect for elders, communal solidarity, a sense of the sacred, hospitality, justice, and shared moral commitments form a common ethical foundation upon which meaningful dialogue can be built. These values, deeply embedded in Nigeria's indigenous cultures, transcend religious divides and provide a culturally grounded, non-threatening platform for promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among different faith traditions.

The recognition of cultural values holds great potential for promoting interreligious dialogue, but challenges such as ethnocentrism, cultural misinterpretation, and historical biases hinder their effective integration. Addressing these issues requires intentional efforts, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive dialogue. Religious leaders, educators, and policymakers must collaborate to foster empathy, respect, and openness. Ultimately, affirming shared cultural values is not only a strategy for dialogue but a moral necessity for achieving peaceful coexistence and national unity in a religiously diverse society like Nigeria.

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