

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE BEYOND BINARIES: RE-EXAMINING CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AS PARTNERS FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGERIA

Peter Anakobe Adinoyi, Rev. Fr.

Federal University Lokoja

Department of Religious Studies

peter.adinoyi@fulokoja.edu.ng; 08032780855 / 08055214140

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5880-9888>

Grace Motunrayo Isaiah, PhD

Federal University Lokoja

grace.isaiah@fulokoja.edu.ng; 08133096036

Abstract

This paper critically re-examines interreligious dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a tool for social cohesion in Nigeria. Despite Nigeria's religious diversity, national interfaith frameworks, such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, exclude ATR, focusing solely on Christian–Muslim relations. This marginalisation overlooks ATR's rich ethical resources and indigenous peace-building mechanisms. The main objective is to assess how meaningful dialogue between Christianity and ATR can foster mutual understanding, prevent conflict, and strengthen social cohesion. Guided by the central question: Can inclusive interreligious dialogue that is identified with ATR contribute to sustainable social cohesion in Nigeria? The research employs a qualitative design using critical discourse analysis and secondary case synthesis, evaluating policy documents, theological writings, media reports, and documented community initiatives. Findings reveal that while formal dialogue is absent, informal and communal engagements (e.g., joint peace ceremonies, cultural festivals) demonstrate significant potential for coexistence. However, barriers such as Pentecostal exclusivism, stigmatization of ATR as “pagan,” political erasure, and cultural erosion impede progress. The study identifies a critical gap: the lack of institutional recognition of ATR in national peace-building structures. It fills this by proposing a decolonial, triadic model of dialogue that centres on indigenous knowledge. The research contributes to scholarship by repositioning ATR as a legitimate dialogue partner and offers practical recommendations: legal recognition of sacred sites, inclusion of ATR in education and NIREC (Nigerian Inter-Religious Council), and support for community-led interfaith initiatives. Future research should explore youth attitudes, comparative models in West Africa, and the impact of inclusive curricula on interreligious prejudice.

Keywords: Inter-religious dialogue, Christianity, African Traditional Religions, Social cohesion and Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, is pigeonholed by remarkable religious and ethnic diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups and two dominant religious traditions, Christianity in the south and Islam in the north, African Traditional Religion (ATR) constitutes a foundational, yet often downgraded spiritual heritage that predates both Abrahamic faiths. Despite the numerical dominance of Christianity and Islam, ATR remains a vital component of Nigeria's cultural, spiritual, and social fabric, especially in rural communities and among indigenous populations.¹

Interreligious dialogue could be said to be the structured, respectful, and purposeful communication between adherents of different faiths. This has increasingly been proposed as a mechanism for conflict mitigation, mutual understanding, and social cohesion in pluralistic societies. In Nigeria, recurrent ethno-religious conflicts, from the Maitatsine riots of the 1980s to the recent Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, have underscored the urgent need for inclusive peace-building frameworks. While much scholarly attention has focused on Christian-Muslim dialogue, the role of ATR, and dialogue between Christianity and ATR specifically, has been largely neglected in both policy and academic discourse.²

Historically, ATR was dismissed by colonial administrators and Christian missionaries as “pagan,” “idolatrous,” or “backward,” contributing to its systemic marginalization in postcolonial Nigerian religious life.³ Yet ATR embodies core values of communal harmony, ancestral reverence, ecological stewardship, and restorative justice, principles that resonate with both Christian ethics and contemporary peace-building paradigms.⁴ The potential for dialogue between Christianity and ATR thus lies not only in theological exchange but also in the recovery of indigenous mechanisms for conflict resolution and social integration.

Recent decades have witnessed modest but growing efforts toward interreligious engagement that include ATR practitioners. For instance, the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999, initially comprised only Christian and Muslim leaders, but civil society organizations such as the Network for Religious and Traditional Peace-makers have begun advocating for the inclusion of traditional religious voices. Similarly, scholars like Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti, and Jacob K. Olupona have long stressed the philosophical depth and ethical coherence of ATR, challenging reductionist portrayals.⁵ Nevertheless, institutional, theological, and socio-political barriers continue to impede meaningful tripartite or bilateral dialogue involving ATR.

¹Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520948842>.

²No comprehensive national study on Christian-ATR dialogue in Nigeria exists. Most interfaith literature focuses exclusively on Christian-Muslim dynamics. See, for example, Toyin Falola, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital in Nigeria* (Carolina Academic Press, 2018).

³Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 22–25.

⁴John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108–115.

⁵Jacob K. Olupona, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1991), 15–30.

⁶United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Social Cohesion,” in *World Public Sector Report 2019*, 45, <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UNPAN-World-Public-Sector-Report-2019>.

This paper situates the dialogue between Christianity and ATR within Nigeria's broader quest for social cohesion, a concept defined here as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, lessen disparities, and avoid polarization through inclusive institutions and shared values. Given Nigeria's history of religious intolerance and exclusion, reimagining interreligious dialogue to include ATR is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for national unity.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Foundations

Interreligious dialogue refers to the reciprocal and respectful communication between adherents of different religious traditions, aimed at fostering mutual understanding, reducing prejudice, and collaborating for the common good.⁷ Unlike debate or proselytization, dialogue accentuates listening, empathy, and the recognition of the other's dignity. The Vatican's 'Nostra Aetate' (1965) and the World Council of Churches' statements have institutionalized dialogue as a Christian ethical imperative in pluralistic contexts.⁸ In the African setting, scholars like Emmanuel Martey argue that dialogue must be “contextual, relational, and liberative,” rooted in local realities rather than imported theological frameworks.⁹

In Nigeria, interreligious dialogue has largely been confined to elite-level Christian-Muslim forums, yet its potential extends to include African Traditional Religion (ATR), a dimension consistently overlooked in both policy and practice. Authentic dialogue with ATR requires moving beyond tokenism to epistemic parity, recognizing traditional religion not as folklore but as a coherent worldview with ethical, metaphysical, and communal dimensions.

Historical Overview of Christian–ATR Relations in Nigeria

Pre-colonial Religious Encounters

Before European contact, ATR was the dominant spiritual system across Nigeria's ethnic groups. Religious life was communal, cyclical, and deeply integrated with ecology and governance. Christianity was absent; thus, no interreligious tension existed. Conversion was inconceivable, as religion was inseparable from ethnic identity.¹⁰ With British colonization in the 19th century, Christian missions, Anglican (CMS), Catholic, and later Pentecostal, arrived with a civilizing mandate. Missionaries like Samuel Ajayi Crowther translated the Bible into Yoruba but simultaneously condemned indigenous practices as “devil worship.” Schools, hospitals, and courts became instruments of religious displacement, privileging Christian morality while criminalizing ATR rituals (e.g., masquerades, divination).¹¹ This created a binary: “civilized” (Christian) versus “pagan” (traditional). Colonial administrators reinforced this by recognizing only Islamic courts

⁷ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), 4, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamation_en.html.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965).

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁹ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 72.

¹⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

¹¹ Olupona, *City of 201 Gods*, 102.

under the Native Courts Ordinance, effectively delegitimizing ATR's juridical role. The result was epistemicide, the systematic devaluation of indigenous knowledge.¹²

After independence (1960), Nigeria adopted a secular constitution but failed to protect religious minorities. ATR practitioners, lacking institutional representation, were excluded from national discourse. The 1979 and 1999 constitutions, guarantee freedom of religion, yet ATR remains unrecognized in practice. Traditional rulers (e.g., Ooni of Ife, Obi of Onitsha) hold cultural authority but no formal religious status in state interfaith bodies.¹³ Meanwhile, Christianity expanded rapidly, especially through Pentecostalism in the 1980s–90s. Churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) grew by denouncing ATR as the source of “spiritual bondage.”¹⁴ This deepened social rift, particularly in urbanizing areas where youth abandoned ancestral rites.

Today, Christian-ATR relations are marked by ambivalence. On one hand, millions practice syncretic Christianity, attending church on Sunday and consulting a *dibia* (Igbo healer) during crises.¹⁵ On the other hand, public discourse remains polarized. Incidents like the 2020 attack on the Osun Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage site sacred to Yoruba religion, by suspected Christian extremists highlight ongoing hostility. Yet grassroots initiatives offer hope. In Ile-Ife, Christian and traditional leaders jointly condemned the desecration of shrines in 2022. Such localized solidarity suggests that dialogue is possible, even amid structural neglect.

Dimensions and Practices of Dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion in Nigeria

The relationship between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Nigeria is neither uniformly antagonistic nor consistently harmonious; rather, it manifests across a spectrum of engagements, formal, informal, and communal, that reflect the complex interplay of belief, culture, power, and identity. Despite the historical marginalization of ATR within national interfaith frameworks, dialogue between these traditions persists, often in unacknowledged or unstructured forms.

Formal interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, as institutionalized through bodies like the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), remains exclusively a Christian–Muslim affair. Established in 1999 under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Vatican, NIREC was designed to mitigate escalating religious tensions but explicitly excluded ATR from its inception.¹⁶ This exclusion reflects a broader national imaginary that frames Nigeria as a bi-religious state, thereby rendering indigenous

¹²Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 96.

¹³J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891* (London: Longmans, 1965), 67.

¹⁴Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 103.

¹⁵Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 145.

¹⁶Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), *Constitution and Operational Guidelines*, 1999 (Abuja:

spiritualities invisible in official peace-building architectures.

However, the absence of formal mechanisms does not signify the absence of dialogue. On the contrary, informal dialogue flourishes in the intimate spaces of family and kinship. It is common, for instance, for Christian children in Igbo and Yoruba communities to participate in ancestral rites during funerals, pouring libations, wearing ceremonial beads, or observing periods of mourning dictated by traditional custom, despite their Sunday worship in Pentecostal or Catholic churches. At the community level, communal dialogue emerges during cultural festivals that transcend religious boundaries. The New Yam Festival (Iri Ji) in Igbo communities, for example, is not merely an agricultural celebration but a sacred event invoking the blessings of *Chineke* (God) and the ancestors. Christians frequently attend, not as worshippers of “idols,” but as members of the community honoring shared heritage. Perhaps most significantly, hybrid governance structures facilitate functional dialogue. In Anambra State, the “Igwe-in-Council” system, a traditional institution comprising the monarch (Igwe) and village elders, has convened joint peace meetings involving pastors and traditional priests to resolve land disputes, inheritance conflicts, and youth violence.¹⁷ These gatherings, though not framed in the language of “interfaith dialogue,” operate as ‘de facto’ interreligious forums where Christian prayer and ancestral invocation coexist as complementary appeals to moral order.

Shared Moral Values and Worldviews

Beneath surface-level tensions lies a deep reservoir of shared ethical commitments between Christianity and ATR. Both traditions prioritize community over individualism, viewing the person not as an autonomous agent but as embedded in networks of kinship, ancestry, and obligation. This communal ethos underpins social responsibility and mutual care, values that directly support social cohesion.

Both also emphasize respect for elders and ancestors. While Christianity venerates elders as spiritual guides and custodians of tradition, ATR extends this reverence to ancestors, who are seen not as divine beings but as moral exemplars and intercessors in the spiritual realm. Furthermore, both traditions uphold the sanctity of life and oaths. Breaking an oath, whether sworn on the Bible or before the gods, is considered a grave offense that disrupts cosmic and social harmony. This shared belief enables joint conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as oath-swearing ceremonies that carry binding moral weight across religious lines.

Perhaps most critically, both ATR and indigenous African Christianity emphasize restorative rather than retributive justice. Justice, in this view, aims not at punishment but at the restoration of broken relationships, through confession, compensation, ritual cleansing, and communal reconciliation. This aligns closely with Jesus' teachings on forgiveness (Matt. 18:15–22) and Paul's call to “live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18).

¹⁷Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Anambra Peacebuilding Evaluation Report, December 2022.

Areas of Theological Convergence and Divergence

Theological engagement between Christianity and ATR reveals both profound affinities and irreducible differences. Convergence begins with the belief in one Supreme Being. The Yoruba refer to *Olodumare*, the Igbo to *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, and the Edo to *Osanobua*, all understood as the uncreated Creator, transcendent yet immanent, source of all life. Both traditions also affirm moral accountability, the belief that human actions have spiritual consequences, and an afterlife where justice is ultimately fulfilled. However, significant divergences persist. Christianity's Christocentric soteriology asserts that salvation comes exclusively through Jesus Christ (John 14:6), whereas ATR offers no concept of "salvation" in the Christian sense but instead seeks harmony between humans, the divine, and nature. ATR's pluralistic cosmology, featuring intermediary divinities (*òrì?à*, *al?s?*), is often misread by Christians as polytheism or idolatry.

Cultural Symbols, Rituals, and Spaces of Encounter

Cultural symbols serve as powerful mediators between religious traditions. The kola nut, for instance, is central to Igbo hospitality and reconciliation. Sharing kola is a sacred act that invokes divine blessing and mutual trust. In mixed-religion communities, it is not uncommon to see a pastor and a *dibia* (traditional healer) share kola before mediating a dispute. Similarly, drumming, dance, and proverbs function as non-doctrinal spaces of encounter. During community festivals, Christian and traditional worshippers may dance to the same rhythms, embodying unity through movement even when their beliefs diverge. Sacred spaces, rivers, hills, groves are particularly contested, yet potentially unifying. The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove stands as a rare example of co-management.

Role of Traditional Institutions and Church Structures

Traditional rulers, Obas in Yorubaland, Obis in Igboland, and the Oba of Benin, wield significant moral authority that often transcends religion. In Benin City, the Oba has mediated disputes between church leaders and shrine keepers. In contrast, church structures exhibit wide variation in openness to dialogue. The Catholic Church, influenced by Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* and African synodal movements, has shown cautious openness. However, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, tend toward exclusivist theologies, viewing ATR as demonic or satanic. This stance is institutionalized in sermons, deliverance programs, and youth training, creating deep barriers to engagement.

Interreligious Dialogue as a Catalyst for Social Cohesion

Dialogue dismantles the stereotypes that fuel religious animosity. When Christians encounter ATR not through sermons but through personal interaction, as neighbours, elders, or peace-builders, they often recognize its moral depth. In Nigeria's conflict-prone Middle Belt, inclusive peace committees that incorporate traditional leaders have yielded measurable results. ATR offers proven conflicts-resolution tools: elder mediation, ritual reconciliation, oath-swearing, and symbolic acts like kola sharing. Trust is built through repeated, positive interaction.

Contributions of Dialogue to Conflict Prevention and Resolution

ATR offers proven conflict-resolution tools: elder mediation, ritual reconciliation, oath-swearing, and symbolic acts like kola sharing. In Imo State, a protracted land dispute between two villages was resolved through a joint ceremony involving Christian prayer and traditional libation, sealed with a kola nut. The agreement has held for over three years, far longer than court-imposed settlements in similar cases. These practices embody Lederach's "moral imagination", the capacity to envision new relational possibilities beyond legalistic or adversarial frameworks.

A Critical Re-Examining of Christianity and African Traditional Religion as Partners for Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Interreligious dialogue serves not merely as a platform for theological exchange but as a strategic instrument for conflict prevention and peace-building in Nigeria's fragmented landscape. Unlike reactive peace-keeping, dialogue operates proactively by addressing root causes of tension, misrecognition, historical grievances, and cultural erasure, before they escalate into violence. John Paul Lederach's concept of "moral imagination" is particularly relevant: it calls for envisioning relationships beyond enemy images, a task made possible through sustained encounters. In Nigerian communities where Christian converts have rejected ancestral rites, dialogue creates space to negotiate identity without rupture, transforming potential flashpoints into opportunities for reconciliation.

Crucially, dialogue activates "positive peace", not just the absence of violence but the presence of justice and inclusion. ATR's emphasis on restorative justice, communal accountability, and sacred ecology complements Christian ethics of forgiveness and love of neighbour. When integrated, these traditions can foster resilient local peace infrastructures. For instance, in Plateau State, inter-faith peace committees that include traditional elders have successfully mediated farmer-herder disputes by invoking shared norms of land stewardship and oath-keeping, mechanisms absent in state-led interventions. Thus, dialogue functions as both a preventive and transformative force.

Case Illustrations from Selected Nigerian Communities

One of the most compelling examples of Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) collaboration occurs in Ile-Ife, Osun State. In Anambra State, the "Ndi Ichie Peace Network" has resolved disputes using blended rituals. Conversely, instances in Oyo and Enugu reveal fragility when exclusivism prevails. These contrasting cases show that dialogue thrives where authority is shared and practical cooperation precedes theological agreement.

Conclusion

This study affirms that interreligious dialogue between Christianity and ATR is not only possible but necessary for social cohesion in Nigeria. Historical marginalization, theological exclusivism, and political erasure have silenced ATR, yet grassroots

collaborations reveal its untapped potential as a peace-building resource. Dialogue thrives where cultural dignity is honored, and shared interests prioritized over doctrinal purity.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Inclusion of ATR in National Interfaith Platforms such as NIREC.
2. Legal Recognition and Protection of Sacred Sites and ATR practices.
3. Inclusive Religious Education Curriculum that incorporates ATR.
4. Funding for Community-Led Interfaith Initiatives involving traditional leaders.
5. Theological Reorientation in Churches to embrace inculturation and dialogue.
6. Media Guidelines to reduce stigmatization of ATR in public discourse.

Bibliography

- Ajayi, J. F. Ade. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891*. London: Longmans, 1965.
- Amnesty International. “Nigeria: Attacks on Traditional Religious Sites.” June 15, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/nigeria-attacks-on-traditional-religious-sites/>.
- Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.
- Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. *Annual Report: Nigeria Programme 2022*. <https://www.hdcentre.org/countries/nigeria/>.
- Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. *Anambra Peacebuilding Evaluation Report*. December 2022.
- Denisin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017.
- De Sousa Santos, Boaventura. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Ela, Jean-Marc. *African Cry*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Falola, Toyin. *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Past, Present, and Future*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2020.
- Falola, Toyin. *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2018.
- Idowu, Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press, 1973.
- Inter-Religious Council of Uganda. *Annual Report 2022*.
- Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Africa (IDFA). *Annual Report 2022*. <https://idfafrica.org/reports>.
- Knitter, Paul F. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Marshall, Ruth. *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

- Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1969.
- Mugambi, Jesse N. K. *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Theology in the 21st Century*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995.
- Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). *Constitution and Operational Guidelines*, 1999. Abuja: NIREC Secretariat.
- Olupona, Jacob K. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991.
- Olupona, Jacob K. *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520948842>.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015.
- Pew Research Center. "Religion in Nigeria: Tolerance and Tension." November 15, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/15/religion-in-nigeria-tolerance-and-tension/>.
- Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamation_en.html.
- Premium Times. "Pentecostal Church Members Destroy Sango Shrine in Oyo." July 12, 2019.
- Second Vatican Council. *Nostra Aetate*. October 28, 1965. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.
- UNESCO. "Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove." World Heritage List, 2005. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118>.
- UNESCO. *Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove: Management Plan 2020–2025*.
- United Nations. "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." UN General Assembly Resolution 61/295, September 13, 2007.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Social Cohesion." In *World Public Sector Report 2019*, 45. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UNPAN-World-Public-Sector-Report-2019>.
- Vaughan, Olufemi. *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.