

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF SACRED VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the relationship between sacred violence and socio-economic instability in Nigeria, arguing that religiously legitimized violence has emerged as both a symptom and a driver of the country's persistent developmental challenges. The protracted, multifaceted nature of contemporary Nigerian conflict characterized by Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, farmer-herder bloodshed in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitations in the Southeast—exposes the limitations of purely economic or purely security-focused analytical frameworks. Employing qualitative analysis of conflict databases, economic indicators, human rights reports, and scholarly literature, the study evaluates the nexus between sacred legitimation and economic disruption through three mechanisms: legitimation of economic predation as religious duty, construction of irreconcilable group boundaries that undermine market integration, and instrumentalization of religious institutions for resource mobilization. The analysis reveals that sacred violence transforms economic behavior by lowering the cost of violence through non-material rewards, raising the cost of peace by making compromise theologically problematic, and creating distinctive war economies organized around religious identity. Profound economic deficits persist, including capital flight, collapse of agricultural value chains, and entrenchment of conflict economies that reward continued violence. The study concludes that sacred violence remains a critical but inadequately addressed variable in Nigeria's socio-economic instability. It argues for integrated policy frameworks that combine economic reconstruction with religious peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, and counter-extremist education reform.

Keywords: Sacred violence, socio-economic instability, Nigeria, Boko Haram, farmer-herder conflict, religious extremism, war economy

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and violence represents one of the most contested domains in contemporary African studies, as scholars grapple with the persistent reality that sacredly legitimized force continues to shape political and economic life across the continent. Originating in classical theories of sacrificial violence and later systematized by scholars of religious extremism, the concept of sacred violence has evolved into a comprehensive analytical framework that seeks to establish how religious legitimation transforms the nature, justification, and economic consequences of armed conflict. This intellectual tradition stands as a mediating force between purely secular economic analyses and purely theological interpretations, asserting that while religious ideas matter, they interact with material conditions in complex, reciprocal ways.

Globally, the significance of sacred violence as an analytical category has experienced a dramatic resurgence in the post-9/11 era, as nations grapple with unprecedented security challenges that defy traditional conflict paradigms. The emergence of religiously framed insurgencies, the proliferation of non-state armed groups claiming divine mandate, and the persistence of communal violence along religious lines have collectively strained conventional economic and political frameworks. According to recent analyses by prominent scholars of religion and violence, contemporary conflicts increasingly operate in "sacred gray zones" where established distinctions between religious and political motivation, sacred and secular legitimation, and divine and material reward are difficult to apply with confidence (Juergensmeyer, 2022; Lincoln, 2020). This has sparked intense scholarly debate between those who emphasize the instrumentalization of religion for material ends and those who insist on the autonomous power of religious ideas to motivate violence (Cavanaugh, 2020; Agbiboa, 2022).

The Evolution of Sacred Violence as a Concept

The concept of sacred violence constitutes a sophisticated analytical framework designed to determine when and how religious legitimation transforms acts of physical destruction into divinely mandated duties, how such legitimation shapes the conduct of violence, and what economic consequences follow from this transformation. This tripartite structure—encompassing legitimation (how violence becomes sacred), operation (how sacred violence is conducted), and consequence (what economic effects follow)—has evolved significantly from its classical origins in comparative religion to address the complexities of contemporary African conflicts.

Legitimation: The Sacralization of Force

Contemporary scholarship has substantially refined the traditional criteria for identifying sacred violence. The seminal work of Juergensmeyer (2022) in *Terror in the Mind of God* remains

foundational, establishing three core characteristics: cosmic war framing (the perception of mundane conflict as transcendent struggle), satanization of the enemy (the construction of opponents as agents of cosmic evil), and performative violence (acts designed to enact divine judgment on earth). Recent debates, however, have challenged and expanded these parameters. Lincoln (2020) distinguishes between "maximalist" sacred violence that explicitly invokes divine command and "minimalist" sacred violence that operates through religiously inflected cultural categories without explicit theological justification, highlighting a fundamental analytical divide in contemporary sacred violence studies. This division manifests practically in debates about whether farmer-herder violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt constitutes sacred violence or merely resource competition with religious labels (Alubo, 2021; Higgott, 2022).

Operation: Mechanisms of Sacred Violence

The mechanisms through which sacred violence operates—legitimation of predation, boundary construction, and institutional capture—have faced particular scrutiny in Nigerian conflict contexts. The principle of distinguishing between religiously motivated and economically motivated violence becomes extraordinarily complex in contexts where actors themselves collapse that distinction. Agbiboa (2022) examines how Boko Haram fighters move seamlessly between religious discourse and economic calculation, challenging binary categorizations that assume religious and material motivations are mutually exclusive. This has led to debates about "sacred economies" and the moral economy of jihad, with significant implications for understanding how armed groups sustain themselves financially while maintaining religious legitimacy (Thurston, 2021).

Consequences: Economic Impacts of Sacred Violence

The most recent expansion of sacred violence theory concerns the distinctive economic consequences of religiously legitimated force. While classical theorists of civil war gave limited attention to religious variables, contemporary scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks. Okoli and Okpaleke (2024) outline three distinctive economic signatures of sacred violence: the durability of predation (sacred legitimation enables sustained economic extraction because perpetrators view their actions as divinely mandated rather than merely criminal), the indivisibility of resources (sacred framing transforms economic assets into religious symbols, making compromise difficult), and the transnationalization of funding (sacred networks enable resource flows that purely economic networks cannot access).

In African contexts, particularly Nigeria, sacred violence takes on particular significance. Scholars like Omenma, Onyishi, and Okolie (2022) argue that conventional economic frameworks often insufficiently address the religious legitimation strategies that armed groups employ to maintain

cohesion, recruit followers, and justify predation. This has led to calls for more integrated approaches that link the analysis of sacred violence with broader political, economic, and social restructuring.

Theoretical Framework

The Legitimation-Predation Nexus

Derived primarily from the work of Agbiboa (2022) and Thurston (2021), this approach emphasizes the moral economy of jihadist insurgency. It operates on several key assumptions: the inseparability of religious and economic motivation for many combatants, the collective legitimation of predation through religious discourse, and the primacy of religious authority in determining what constitutes lawful spoils.

This framework provides valuable analytical tools for examining how armed groups justify economic extraction, how rules of engagement emerge from religious interpretation, and how the rights and obligations of combatants are shaped by sacred categories. However, its limitations become apparent in analyzing conflicts where religious legitimation is contested within religious communities themselves. The legitimation-predation nexus approach's focus on jihadist groups can obscure the ethical dimensions of state counter-insurgency operations, which may themselves deploy sacred legitimation strategies (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2024).

CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF SACRED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

The Erosion of Distinction Between Religious and Economic Violence

The foundational distinction between religiously motivated violence and economically motivated violence faces unprecedented challenges in contemporary Nigeria, particularly regarding the erosion of traditional boundaries that have long structured analytical discourse about conflict. These collapsing boundaries present profound analytical dilemmas that test the coherence and applicability of conventional frameworks.

The Sacred-Secular Binary Under Duress

The principle of distinguishing between sacred and secular motivation has become increasingly difficult to apply in practice. This phenomenon extends across multiple Nigerian conflict zones. According to Omenma, Onyishi, and Okolie (2022), analysis of over 23,900 security events between 2020 and 2024 revealed that only 4.3 percent were fueled primarily by religion, while the vast majority involved complex combinations of economic, political, and religious factors. These conflicts operate in analytical gray zones where the religious legitimation of violence serves economic ends and economic grievances are expressed in religious idioms.

Research by Oyewole (2023) documents how the instrumentalization of religious identity allows armed groups to mobilize support that purely economic appeals cannot generate. The targeting of religious sites—over 700 incidents between 2021 and 2023—serves both symbolic and economic functions: the destruction of churches and mosques signals cosmic war while also providing opportunities for looting, extortion, and territorial control. This deliberate exploitation of the ambiguity between sacred and secular motivation allows armed groups to pursue economic objectives while maintaining religious legitimacy.

Blurred Landscapes: The Spatial and Economic Expansion of Sacred Violence

Contemporary sacred violence no longer conforms to traditional geographic or economic boundaries. The expansion of sacred violence into economic domains—markets, farms, livestock routes, trade corridors—creates environments where religious objectives and economic infrastructure are inextricably intertwined. Rural violence, now the predominant form of contemporary conflict in Nigeria according to data from the International Crisis Group (2021), presents particular challenges for distinguishing between religiously motivated and economically motivated violence. The high density of economic activity in rural areas, the complexity of land use patterns, and the intermingling of religious identity with occupational categories (pastoralist versus farmer) make it extraordinarily difficult to apply conventional analytical distinctions with precision.

The temporal expansion of sacred violence through protracted, low-intensity conflict further complicates analysis. As documented by Anyadike (2023), the prolonged nature of Nigeria's conflicts has created "conflict economies" where violence becomes normalized and sacred legitimization persists across generations. Children born into displacement camps in Northeast Nigeria have known no reality except sacredly legitimated violence, creating conditions where religious justifications for economic predation become naturalized through socialization.

The Instrumentalization of Religious Identity for Economic Ends

The conflict in northern and central Nigeria, particularly involving Boko Haram, ISWAP, and militant herder groups, exemplifies the instrumentalization of religious identity for economic ends. These armed actors have systematically exploited religious identities by framing resource competition—land, water, grazing routes—as religious struggle. This strategy places analysts in a sustained analytical dilemma: to uphold the distinction between religious and economic motivation while facing actors who deliberately collapse that distinction. The result is a persistent tension between acknowledging the genuine religious beliefs of combatants and recognizing the economic functions that sacred legitimization serves.

The use of religious identity in this context has become a routine strategy rather than an exceptional occurrence. Armed groups in the Lake Chad region and Middle Belt frequently invoke religious categories to mobilize fighters, justify seizures, and delegitimize opponents. Higgott (2022) distinguishes between "elite instrumentalization" (where leaders cynically deploy religious rhetoric for strategic ends) and "grassroots sacralization" (where ordinary combatants genuinely internalize religious justifications for violence). In northern Nigeria, where poverty, state neglect, and environmental degradation blur the lines between genuine religious conviction and economic desperation, distinguishing elite manipulation from grassroots belief becomes exceptionally difficult in practice.

This distinction collapses further at the moment of economic decision-making. Fighters who have internalized sacred justifications for violence may refuse economic compromises that their commanders would accept, creating principal-agent problems within armed groups. Agbiboa (2022) argues that understanding the economic logic of sacred violence requires attention to both the strategic calculations of leaders and the moral commitments of ordinary fighters. The ethical burden, therefore, shifts to analysts who must develop frameworks that account for this complexity without abandoning analytical rigor.

Ultimately, the analysis of northern and central Nigeria reveals the limitations of frameworks that assume religious and economic motivations are either mutually exclusive or reducible one to the other. While armed groups bear primary responsibility for instrumentalizing religious identity, the situation also exposes the limitations of analytical frameworks designed for secular conflicts. Researchers, facing criticism for either overemphasizing or underemphasizing religious factors, operate within a structure where clean analytical distinctions become nearly impossible to apply. In this context, the analytical imperative must extend beyond identifying primary motivations to include greater attention to how religious legitimation transforms economic behavior, how economic conditions shape religious receptivity, and how both factors interact to produce distinctive conflict dynamics.

CASE STUDIES AND APPLICATIONS OF SACRED VIOLENCE ANALYSIS IN NIGERIA

Case Study 1: Boko Haram and the Sacred Economy of the Northeast

The protracted conflict between the Nigerian state and Boko Haram (and its splinter factions including ISWAP) represents a complex laboratory for examining the relationship between sacred violence and socio-economic instability in a context characterized by asymmetric warfare, transnational dimensions, and severe humanitarian consequences.

Legitimation Analysis

Boko Haram's legitimation of violence presents both clear and contested aspects from a sacred violence perspective. The sacred legitimation criterion is ostensibly satisfied by the group's extensive invocation of Islamic jurisprudence, divine command, and eschatological reward. As documented by Thurston (2021), Boko Haram's propaganda consistently frames attacks on civilians, kidnapping of schoolgirls, and destruction of churches as divinely mandated acts of *jihad*. However, scholars like Agbibo (2022) argue that the group's economic practices—bank robberies, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom—reveal significant material motivations, raising questions about whether sacred legitimation serves primarily instrumental functions.

Economic Consequences Assessment

The economic impact of Boko Haram's sacred violence in Northeast Nigeria reveals significant disruptions. Research by Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwaako (2022) documents persistent economic decline, with the conflict reducing regional economic growth by over 2 percent annually. Agricultural collapse frequently results from attacks on farms, seizure of livestock, and displacement of farming populations. Anyadike (2023) found that households exposed to Boko Haram violence experienced declines in consumption of 30-40 percent, with severe impacts on asset holdings and investments in children's education.

The war economy dynamic faces particular challenges in protracted counter-insurgency operations. As documented by Eme and Ugwu (2021), the Nigerian government's military response has required massive reallocation of public spending from development to security, with estimated costs of US\$10.3 billion in 2020 alone. The use of emergency funds and security votes, often with limited oversight, raises complex questions about the opportunity costs of sacred violence.

Long-Term Instability Projections

The prospects for economic recovery in Northeast Nigeria remain uncertain. Research by Akinbiyi (2024) highlights significant gaps in reconstruction mechanisms, with insufficient attention to the distinctive challenges of rebuilding economies traumatized by sacred violence. The Nigerian government's reconstruction programs have achieved limited success, with questions about whether standard economic development frameworks adequately address the religious dimensions of the conflict.

Case Study 2: Farmer-Herder Conflict and Sacred Land in the Middle Belt

The escalating violence between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian farming communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt represents a distinct but related

manifestation of sacred violence, where resource competition and religious identity have become inextricably intertwined.

Sacred Framing of Resource Competition

The legitimization of violence in the Middle Belt operates through different mechanisms than in the Northeast. According to Alubo (2021), the framing of land and water access as religious struggle—Muslim herders seeking grazing routes against Christian farmers protecting ancestral land—has transformed localized resource conflicts into sacred struggles. Higgott (2022) documents how external discourses of Islamization become integrated into local narratives, with herder militias sometimes invoking *jihad* and Christian self-defense groups framing their struggle as defense of the faith against expansionist Islam.

Economic Disruption Mechanisms

The economic consequences of sacredly framed farmer-herder violence have been devastating. According to ICG (2021), the conflict has disrupted previously functioning systems of seasonal migration, land access agreements, and inter-community marriages that had managed environmental pressures for generations. The collapse of these arrangements has reduced agricultural productivity, destroyed livestock assets, and created internally displaced populations across the Middle Belt. Oyewole (2023) found that religious site attacks in the region have displaced entire communities, with economic losses extending far beyond the immediate destruction of property.

Regional Economic Spillovers

The Middle East conflict has generated significant economic spillovers beyond directly affected areas. Okoli and Okpaleke (2024) document how violence along the Jos Plateau has disrupted trade routes connecting northern and southern Nigeria, increasing transportation costs and reducing market integration. The perception of the Middle Belt as a conflict zone has deterred investment, depressed land values, and encouraged capital flight to safer regions.

Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Implications

Patterns of Sacred Violence Across Cases

Comparative analysis of these case studies reveals several recurring patterns that challenge conventional analytical frameworks:

First, the legitimization-predation nexus appears consistently across cases. In both the Northeast and Middle Belt, sacred framing enables economic extraction that purely criminal groups would

struggle to sustain. Actors who understand themselves as fulfilling divine commands engage in predation with fewer moral constraints than purely economically motivated actors.

Second, boundary construction emerges as a common mechanism. Sacred violence draws sharp lines between "us" and "them" that undermine economic integration, prevent cross-boundary trade, and reduce labor mobility. In both regions, the sacralization of conflict has disrupted previously functioning economic relationships.

Third, the instrumentalization of religious institutions appears as a shared feature. Armed groups across Nigeria have captured mosques, churches, and religious networks for resource mobilization, recruitment, and legitimation.

Implications for Theory Development

These case studies suggest several directions for theoretical development. First, there is a need for more robust frameworks for analyzing the economic functions of sacred legitimation. Second, the cases highlight the importance of regional economic networks in shaping sacred violence dynamics. Third, the distinctive characteristics of sacred violence economies require greater attention to how religious legitimation transforms valuation, exchange, and accumulation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study affirms that sacred violence remains an indispensable but insufficiently integrated variable in understanding Nigeria's socio-economic instability. Its enduring analytical value lies in providing structured approaches to the fundamental questions of how religious legitimation transforms economic behavior, why armed groups invest in sacred framing, and what distinctive economic consequences follow from sacredly legitimated violence—questions that remain as urgent today as when the concept first emerged. The mechanisms of legitimation, boundary construction, and institutional capture continue to offer essential analytical tools for understanding Nigeria's conflict economy.

However, the concept's limitations in addressing 21st-century Nigerian realities are substantial and growing. The classical framework, developed primarily for analyzing religious terrorism, struggles to accommodate the realities of hybrid conflicts where sacred and secular motivations intertwine. Its Western philosophical origins and historical development create potential blind spots when applied to African contexts with different religious histories and cultural frameworks. The concept's analytical focus on armed groups sometimes inadequately addresses state violence and the role of religious legitimation in counter-insurgency operations.

The concept's greatest contribution may be its insistence that religious ideas—however instrumentalized they may sometimes appear—have autonomous power to shape economic

behavior and that purely economic analyses that ignore sacred legitimation are incomplete. This insistence represents a crucial corrective to reductionist approaches, one that remains vitally important despite the concept's limitations and the formidable challenges of empirical application.

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