LANGUAGE, RELIGION, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Nigeria's religious and linguistic plurality makes public communication an important site for the construction and negotiation of social identity. This study examines how religious language constructs belonging, represents social groups, and shapes relations between religious and ethnic communities in contemporary Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design, combining Social Identity Theory with Critical Discourse Analysis. Four publicly available religious communications issued in 2024 and 2025 were purposively selected: the August 2024 Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) intervention during the nationwide protests; Sultan Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III's 2025 Eid-el-Fitr message; Archbishop Daniel C. Okoh's 2024 Eid-el-Kabir message; and Okoh's 2025 World Interfaith Harmony Week intervention. The analysis focuses on pronoun use, naming and labelling, inclusive and exclusive constructions, religious vocabulary, appeals to shared values, and representations of religious and national identity. The findings show that religious discourse can construct both bounded and inclusive identities. Exclusive labels and oppositional representations may sharpen in-group and out-group distinctions, while inclusive pronouns, shared moral vocabulary, and appeals to common citizenship can broaden religious identity into civic identity. Recent Nigerian scholarship similarly shows that digital and electoral discourse may reproduce religious othering through demonisation, stereotyping, and exclusion. The study therefore argues that religious communication is not simply a vehicle for theological instruction but a form of social action with consequences for social cohesion. It recommends greater linguistic sensitivity among religious communicators, stronger interfaith literacy, responsible media mediation, and deliberate use of inclusive discourse in public religious communication

Keywords: *Language, Religion, Social Identity, Critical Discourse Analysis, Religious Communication, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Language is central to the organization of human social life because it does more than transmit information. It names people and groups, expresses values, establishes relationships, and provides categories through which social reality is interpreted. In religious settings, these functions become particularly significant because language is connected to sacred texts, rituals,

moral judgments, communal memories, and claims about truth. Religious communication therefore participates in identity formation by telling adherents who they are, what they should value, how they should behave, and how they should understand those who do not share their faith.

Nigeria provides an important context for examining these processes. Its religious landscape includes large Christian and Muslim populations, continuing African Traditional Religious influences, and considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. Religious identity frequently intersects with ethnic, regional, political, and cultural identities. Consequently, a religious statement may have implications beyond theology: it may affirm communal belonging, mobilize political sentiment, define moral boundaries, or encourage reconciliation across group differences.

The importance of this relationship has increased with the expansion of mass and digital media. Sermons, religious statements, prayers, festival messages, interviews, and public addresses now circulate through radio, television, news websites, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and other platforms. A message originally directed at a particular religious audience can quickly become part of a national conversation. Recent Nigerian research demonstrates both the divisive and integrative possibilities of this development. Chigbu, Aboh, and Ganaah identify demonisation, in-group ostracisation, and stereotyping as significant strategies through which religious othering occurs in Nigerian electoral discourse. Their study examined more than 14,000 Facebook comments and showed how online religious identities can become polarized through language.
Similarly, recent research on digital Christianity in Southeast Nigeria indicates the increasing importance of faith-based social media platforms in contemporary religious engagement (Megwas et al. 1188–96).

Religious discourse, however, is not inherently divisive. Nigerian religious leaders frequently use public communication to promote peace, forgiveness, unity, mutual respect, and shared citizenship. Recent messages by Sultan Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III and Archbishop Daniel Okoh illustrate this possibility. In March 2025, the Sultan called for peace, unity, and religious tolerance and urged Nigerians to support national development while holding leaders accountable respectfully. In February 2025, Okoh advocated religious literacy and interfaith dialogue, arguing that Nigerians should emphasize the values that unite them rather than those that divide them.

The central argument of this study is that public religious communication is a significant site for identity construction in contemporary Nigeria. Religious language can strengthen solidarity by creating a sense of shared faith, but it can also produce exclusion when it represents other groups as morally inferior, threatening, or outside the legitimate community. Conversely, religious discourse can contribute to national cohesion when it combines faith-specific meanings with inclusive language about human dignity, citizenship, peace, and the common good. The study therefore examines not only what religious leaders say but how linguistic choices construct relationships between speakers, audiences, religious groups, and the Nigerian nation.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Framework

Language

Language is a symbolic system through which human beings communicate ideas, emotions, experiences, and values. Sapir describes it as a human and non-instinctive means of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires through voluntarily produced symbols (7). Halliday's conception of language as a social semiotic system further emphasizes that meaning is produced within social contexts. Language is therefore both communicative and relational: it enables people to express themselves while simultaneously positioning them in relation to others.

In religious communication, language acquires additional significance because words are connected with sacred authority and communal memory. Expressions drawn from scripture, prayer, ritual, doctrine, and religious tradition can signal membership and shared belief. Terms such as “the faithful,” “born again,” “the Ummah,” “brother,” and “sister” function not merely as descriptive expressions but also as identity markers.

Nigeria's multilingual environment makes the relationship between language and identity even more complex. Religious communication may move between English, Nigerian Pidgin, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Arabic expressions, and other indigenous languages. Such choices may enhance accessibility and cultural resonance while also connecting religious identity with ethnic or regional belonging. Language consequently becomes one of the mechanisms through which religious, cultural, and national identities overlap.

Religion and Religious Identity

Religion may be understood as a system of beliefs, practices, symbols, and moral orientations through which individuals and communities relate to the sacred and interpret existence. Durkheim emphasizes the social character of religion by describing it as a system of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things that unites adherents into a moral community (44). Geertz similarly understands religion as a system of symbols that shapes human moods, motivations, and conceptions of reality (90).

Religious identity refers to the manner in which individuals understand themselves through membership in a religious community. It includes beliefs, practices, symbols, narratives, and emotional attachments. In Nigeria, religious identity frequently intersects with ethnicity, region, political affiliation, and cultural identity. Consequently, public religious language may communicate assumptions about social belonging beyond the immediate theological message.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, associated particularly with Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. Tajfel and Turner identify social categorization, social identification, and social comparison as important processes in group identity formation (283–93).

The framework is useful for understanding Nigerian religious communication because labels such as Christian, Muslim, believer, faithful, Ummah, or convert can create boundaries of

belonging. Public religious discourse makes these categories salient by naming communities, celebrating their values, and describing their relationship with other groups. The same process can become divisive when positive representations of an in-group are accompanied by negative representations of an out-group.

Social identity is nevertheless not fixed or exclusively religious. Individuals possess multiple identities, and the salience of one identity may change according to context. A religious leader who addresses listeners first as Christians or Muslims and then as Nigerians is moving between different levels of identity. Such movement is important for national cohesion because it can transform a narrowly bounded religious identity into a broader civic identity.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis examines discourse as social practice and is concerned with relationships among language, power, ideology, and social structures. Fairclough argues that discourse both reflects social relations and participates in producing them, while van Dijk emphasizes the role of discourse in the formation and reproduction of ideologies.

For this study, the approach directs attention to the social work performed by linguistic choices. The analysis therefore considers how speakers name groups, use pronouns, construct inclusion and exclusion, invoke religious authority, establish moral categories, and frame social problems. Particular attention is paid to “we,” “us,” “our,” and “they” constructions; labels for religious communities; appeals to shared values; and movement between religious and national identities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design. The objective is not to measure the frequency of religious expressions across the Nigerian population but to examine how selected public communications construct identity, belonging, difference, and social responsibility.

Four publicly accessible communications issued in 2024 and 2025 were purposively selected. The first is the August 2024 intervention associated with the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), involving the Sultan and CAN leadership, during the nationwide protests. This text is treated as an institutional interfaith communication rather than attributed exclusively to the Sultan. The intervention emphasized calm, dialogue, responsible security conduct, and governmental attention to citizens' grievances.

The second is Sultan Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III's Eid-el-Fitr message of March 2025, in which he called for peace, unity, religious tolerance, prayers for national stability, and responsible criticism of leaders.

The third is Archbishop Daniel Okoh's Eid-el-Kabir message of June 2024. The message addressed Muslims directly while calling on Nigerians to embrace sacrifice, obedience, faith, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and national unity. It also emphasized the possibility of citizens thriving regardless of religion, tribe, or creed.

The fourth is Archbishop Okoh's intervention during the 2025 United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week. He emphasized religious literacy, dialogue, common values, and resistance to teachings that use religion to create enmity among Nigerians.

The four texts were selected because they directly address religion, citizenship, peace, unity, intergroup relations, or national responsibility. Each text was read repeatedly and examined for recurring identity categories and significant linguistic choices. The second stage involved identifying pronouns, labels, evaluative expressions, religious references, imperatives, appeals to shared values, and representations of other groups. The third stage interpreted these patterns using Social Identity Theory and discourse-analytic principles, particularly the construction of in-groups and out-groups, the negotiation of boundaries, and the movement between particular and superordinate identities.

The analysis is interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The selected communications are not presented as representative of all Nigerian religious speech. Instead, they constitute focused cases that demonstrate how prominent religious actors use public language to negotiate religious and civic identities.

Public Religious Communication and Identity Construction

Construction of the Religious In-Group

A central function of religious communication is the construction of an in-group. Religious leaders address audiences as members of a moral community through expressions that establish shared identity. Terms such as “brothers and sisters,” “the faithful,” “the Ummah,” and “we” create symbolic communities in which speakers and audiences occupy a common position.

The 2025 Eid-el-Fitr message of Sultan Sa'ad Abubakar illustrates this process. The Sultan's message emerged from an Islamic religious occasion, but its scope extended beyond Muslims to the Nigerian public. His emphasis on prayer, unity, tolerance, national stability, charity, patience, and discipline connected Islamic virtues with civic responsibility.

The movement from religious identity to national identity is significant. The believer is not constructed only as a member of the Muslim community but also as a Nigerian with obligations toward the wider society. Religious identity is therefore retained while being incorporated into a broader civic framework.

Okoh's public messages demonstrate a similar movement. His 2025 call for religious literacy and dialogue presented knowledge of other faiths as a means of strengthening national harmony. The message did not require Christians and Muslims to abandon their respective traditions; instead, it encouraged them to recognize shared values.

Pronouns, Inclusion and Exclusion

Pronouns are small linguistic forms with substantial social consequences. “We” can include the speaker and audience, whereas “they” may establish distance. The meaning of “we” is therefore context-dependent. It may refer to Muslims, Christians, religious leaders, Nigerians, or humanity generally.

In Okoh's 2025 interfaith intervention, the emphasis on what Nigerians share encourages a collective identity that transcends denominational boundaries. The rhetorical movement from separate religious identities toward a shared Nigerian identity illustrates the construction of a superordinate category.

Exclusionary language can produce the opposite effect. Expressions that contrast "our people" with "those people" can turn difference into moral distance. When another religious community is repeatedly described as dangerous, ignorant, impure, or illegitimate, social categorization becomes a mechanism of polarization.

Chigbu, Aboh, and Ganaah's recent study provides important empirical support for this concern. Their analysis of more than 14,000 Facebook comments identified demonisation, in-group ostracisation, and stereotyping as strategies of religious othering during Nigeria's 2023 electoral discourse. The finding demonstrates that linguistic boundaries can become especially powerful when religious identity intersects with political competition.

Religious Vocabulary and Moral Authority

Public religious communication frequently derives authority from sacred vocabulary. References to God, Allah, prayer, scripture, forgiveness, sacrifice, repentance, and divine judgment give religious messages a moral register.

Such vocabulary can encourage ethical conduct and solidarity. Okoh's 2024 Eid-el-Kabir message is illustrative. Addressing Muslims as "brothers and sisters," he connected the festival's themes of sacrifice, obedience, and faith with calls for unity, forgiveness, reconciliation, and national peace.

The significance lies not simply in the religious vocabulary but in its extension beyond the immediate faith community. Islamic festival concepts were presented as values capable of benefiting Nigerian society generally. Religious language thus becomes a bridge between particular religious identity and common civic morality.

The same pattern appears in the Sultan's 2025 message. Religious virtues associated with Ramadan were connected with national stability, responsible citizenship, and peaceful coexistence.

Religious Speeches as Sites of Identity Negotiation

The four selected communications make the theoretical discussion concrete.

The 2024 NIREC intervention during the nationwide protests demonstrates how interfaith institutional communication can construct a national identity during a period of social tension. Rather than presenting the crisis exclusively through religious categories, the intervention emphasized dialogue, restraint, governmental responsibility, and citizens' legitimate concerns. The discourse consequently positioned national stability as a shared responsibility.

The Sultan's 2025 Eid-el-Fitr message similarly connected Muslim identity with Nigerian citizenship. The call for unity, tolerance, national prayer, and responsible criticism of leaders shows how a religious leader can use a faith-specific occasion to address the wider public.

Okoh's 2024 Eid-el-Kabir message offers an especially important example of interfaith recognition. A Christian institutional leader addressed Muslims on an Islamic festival, affirmed its values, and called on all Nigerians to build a society in which citizens could thrive regardless of religion, tribe, or creed.

His 2025 World Interfaith Harmony Week intervention goes further by explicitly advocating religious literacy and dialogue. His argument that citizens should emphasize shared values rather than divisive differences demonstrates an attempt to construct a civic identity capable of containing religious plurality.

These examples demonstrate that religious speech can do more than strengthen an existing group. It can redraw the boundaries of the moral community. The crucial question is whether audiences are addressed primarily as closed religious groups or as religious citizens who also participate in a wider national community.

Naming, Labelling and the Construction of the Other

Identity construction also occurs through naming. Groups may be described through neutral, positive, negative, or highly symbolic labels. Religious labels can therefore influence how audiences understand those to whom the labels refer.

Recent research by Chigbu, Aboh, and Ganaah demonstrates the seriousness of this issue in Nigeria. Their study found that religious othering in electoral discourse occurred through demonisation, in-group ostracisation, and stereotyping. Individuals who did not conform to expected religious-political positions could themselves be excluded from their own religious in-group.

This finding reveals that religious identity is not merely a matter of formal affiliation. It can become a contested discursive category. A person may be accepted as a legitimate member of a religious community or linguistically pushed toward its margins depending on political or ideological alignment.

The digital environment can intensify this process. Religious statements may be reproduced without their original context, accompanied by inflammatory captions, or circulated among audiences who were not present when the message was delivered. Recent research on digital Christianity in Southeast Nigeria confirms the expanding role of social media in contemporary religious engagement (Megwas et al. 1188–96).

Responsible religious communication therefore requires caution in naming and labelling. Religious criticism may address ideas, doctrines, or practices without turning entire communities into negative categories.

Language, Religion and Ethnic Identity

Religious identity in Nigeria cannot be understood independently of ethnicity and language. Although Christianity and Islam cut across ethnic boundaries, historical and cultural patterns have produced perceived associations between certain religious communities and particular regions or ethnic groups.

The use of indigenous languages in worship can have an integrative effect because it makes religious communication culturally accessible. It can strengthen community identity through familiar idioms, proverbs, historical memories, and cultural symbols. This does not make indigenous-language worship problematic; rather, it demonstrates that identity is layered.

A Nigerian may simultaneously understand himself or herself as Christian or Muslim, as a member of an ethnic group, and as Nigerian. Problems emerge when one identity is presented as the only legitimate basis of belonging.

Public religious communication can help manage these overlapping identities by acknowledging particular communities while emphasizing common citizenship. Expressions such as "our nation," "our fellow Nigerians," "our neighbours," and "the common good" construct a civic identity capable of containing religious and ethnic difference.

Media and the Digital Expansion of Religious Identity

Media technologies have transformed the circulation of religious discourse in Nigeria. Radio and television expanded the reach of sermons and religious programmes, while smartphones and social media created continuous spaces for religious interaction. Religious messages can now be recorded, clipped, reposted, translated, commented upon, and combined with images or captions.

Digital platforms strengthen identity by enabling believers to display religious affiliation publicly. Religious quotations, prayers, testimonies, festival greetings, and scriptural images allow users to perform identity before audiences that may extend beyond their immediate communities. Recent evidence from Southeast Nigeria confirms the importance of this development. Megwas et al. found substantial exposure to and use of faith-based social media platforms among Christians in the region, demonstrating the increasing role of Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms in religious engagement (1188–96).

At the same time, digital communication can intensify othering. Chigbu, Aboh, and Ganaah's research shows how online electoral discourse reproduced religious stereotypes, demonisation, and exclusion. The problem is therefore not technology itself but the communicative practices that technology amplifies.

Digital communication also changes the relationship between religious leaders and audiences. Users can comment, challenge, remix, and redistribute messages. Religious identity consequently becomes participatory: audiences do not merely receive discourse but help reproduce it.

Religious institutions therefore require digital communication ethics. Religious leaders and their media teams should recognize that online messages may reach audiences outside the intended faith community. Context, respectful language, and avoidance of inflammatory generalizations are consequently essential.

Religious Discourse, Power and National Cohesion

Religious discourse possesses considerable social power because religious institutions command moral authority and enjoy extensive social reach. When prominent religious leaders speak publicly, their words may influence perceptions of morality, politics, ethnicity, citizenship, and social responsibility.

Public religious communication can support national cohesion when it constructs inclusive forms of belonging. The selected messages of the Sultan and CAN President provide useful examples. The Sultan's call for unity and tolerance presents religious commitment as compatible with national solidarity. Okoh's emphasis on dialogue and religious literacy similarly presents knowledge of other faiths as a resource for peaceful coexistence.

This integrative possibility is strengthened by shared moral vocabulary. Peace, justice, compassion, forgiveness, sacrifice, dignity, honesty, and responsibility are values that can be communicated across religious boundaries. They do not erase theological differences but create points of ethical convergence.

The opposite occurs when religious authority is used to legitimize exclusion. If an entire religious community is portrayed as inherently evil, if extremists are treated as representatives of an entire faith, or if political disagreement is described as religious betrayal, discourse may convert difference into hostility.

Nigeria's overlapping religious, ethnic, regional, and political identities make this particularly important. A hostile religious message may activate several social boundaries simultaneously. Conversely, inclusive language can cross several boundaries at once.

Discussion of Findings

Three major findings emerge from the analysis.

First, public religious communication constructs identity through linguistic inclusion. Pronouns, religious labels, greetings, sacred vocabulary, and references to shared practices create recognizable communities. Such language is central to religious continuity because it gives adherents ways of naming themselves and understanding their collective identity.

Second, identity construction becomes potentially divisive when difference is represented through exclusionary language. Recent Nigerian scholarship demonstrates that religious othering may occur through stereotyping, demonisation, and in-group exclusion, especially in politically charged online environments (Chigbu, Aboh, and Ganaah). Social Identity Theory helps explain why such patterns can be powerful: individuals seek positive group identity, while discourse supplies the categories through which groups are compared.

Third, religious discourse can construct a superordinate Nigerian identity. The selected communications demonstrate that religious leaders can move from faith-specific language toward inclusive language about citizens, peace, unity, dialogue, and the common good. The Sultan's 2025 Eid message and Okoh's 2024 and 2025 interventions particularly demonstrate this movement.

These findings demonstrate the complementary value of Social Identity Theory and discourse analysis. Social Identity Theory explains the importance of group membership, while

discourse analysis shows how linguistic choices make group memberships visible and meaningful. Identity is therefore not simply possessed; it is continually performed, negotiated, and reconstructed through communication.

Recommendations

First, religious leaders should deliberately use inclusive language when addressing public audiences. Religious disagreement should be distinguished from hostility toward persons or communities.

Second, religious institutions should strengthen interfaith and religious-literacy programmes. Knowledge of other traditions can reduce fear generated by ignorance and create opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

Third, religious organizations should establish digital communication guidelines for sermons, social-media posts, videos, and public statements. Online material can easily be removed from its original context; consequently, respectful language and avoidance of inflammatory generalizations should be treated as ethical requirements.

Fourth, media organizations should report religious issues with contextual accuracy. Headlines, captions, and selective quotations can intensify social boundaries even where the original speech was moderate. Journalists should therefore avoid sensationalism and provide adequate context.

Finally, universities and schools should strengthen teaching in media literacy, intercultural communication, and discourse awareness. Citizens who can identify stereotypes, manipulative framing, and exclusionary language are better positioned to resist divisive narratives.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between language, religion, and social identity in contemporary Nigeria through selected public religious communications. The study demonstrates that religious language is a form of social action. It names communities, establishes belonging, invokes moral authority, constructs boundaries, and influences how citizens understand themselves and others.

The selected communications by the Sultan of Sokoto, NIREC, and Archbishop Daniel Okoh demonstrate that public religious discourse can operate in two broad directions. It can strengthen bounded religious identities through faith-specific language, or it can broaden identity through inclusive references to shared humanity, citizenship, peace, dialogue, and national unity. The distinction is therefore not between religious and non-religious communication but between different ways of representing religious difference.

Recent Nigerian research on online and electoral discourse reinforces this conclusion. Digital platforms can amplify othering, stereotyping, and religious bigotry, but religious and media actors can also use communication to promote tolerance and dialogue.

Nigeria's pluralism should not be regarded solely as a problem to be managed. It can become a resource for national development when public discourse recognizes difference without

converting it into hostility. Religious communication has an important role in this process. By affirming dignity, rejecting collective blame, promoting dialogue, and emphasizing common citizenship, religious leaders can contribute to a public culture in which religious identities remain meaningful without becoming barriers to national solidarity.

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