

# Conflicts in Northern Nigeria and the Role of (Inter-)Religious Education in Peacebuilding

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## Abstract

This study investigates the sociopolitical and historical underpinnings of conflict in Nigeria, focusing on how religious education exacerbates tensions. Using a descriptive survey research design and thematic analysis of Nigeria's religious education curricula, it highlights deep-rooted ethnic, regional, and religious divisions, particularly in the northern regions, where mistrust and violence hinder peaceful coexistence. A central finding is the inadequacy of existing religious education frameworks, particularly in Christianity and Islam, which fail to engage meaningfully with religious "Others," thereby deepening societal divides. To address this, the research advocates for integrating interreligious education into Nigeria's national curriculum. Key recommendations include introducing interreligious education at the primary level to foster early appreciation for diversity and unity, training educators to effectively teach these subjects, and developing inclusive curricula that promote dialogue without bias or proselytization. These reforms aim to instill values of tolerance, mutual respect, and social cohesion, empowering students to engage with diverse perspectives while preserving their own beliefs. This study addresses a critical research gap by highlighting the transformative potential of interreligious education, an area often overlooked in favor of general peace education. Given the absence of empirical studies in the Nigerian context, this research bridges theoretical insights with practical recommendations. However, future studies are essential to evaluate the long-term impacts of interreligious education on fostering peace and transforming interfaith relationships, providing valuable evidence to guide sustainable policy reforms.

**Keywords:** Interreligious Education, Peacebuilding, Northern Nigeria, Conflict Resolution, Christian-Muslim Relations.

## Introduction

Plateau State, once renowned for its peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic and religious groups, has seen a decline in its reputation as tensions between Christians and Muslims escalated into violence. This shift has undermined the region's stability, contributing to a broader threat to peace across Nigeria. Unfortunately, this pervasive violence now affects nearly every aspect of Nigerian society. Nigeria's religious

demographics align closely with its regional divisions: the north is predominantly Muslim, while the south is predominantly Christian. These divisions are rooted in historical factors, including the presence of Muslim traders in the north during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and the more limited spread of missionary activities in the north compared to the extensive missionary efforts in the south, which helped shape its Christian identity (World Watch Research, 2023).

The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, predominantly Muslim, is concentrated in the North-West and North-East regions of Nigeria, which also have significant Christian minorities. The Igbo people, mostly Christian, are primarily located in the South-East, while the Yoruba in the South-West have a more balanced distribution of Christians and Muslims. In the southern region, Christians constitute a substantial majority, with a growing Muslim minority. Despite the broad religious divide between the predominantly Christian South and the predominantly Muslim North, the North-Central region stands out for its religious plurality, with Christians and Muslims living in roughly equal numbers (World Watch Research, 2023; US Department of State, 2022).

Due to its diversity, Nigeria has faced various conflicts—religious, political, economic, and social—and is considered one of the continent's most fragmented states (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). These conflicts have strained relationships and, in extreme cases, led to the violent loss of lives and property, hindering peaceful coexistence. While pluralism and religious diversity offer opportunities for cross-cultural learning, they can also fuel tension and division, as religious differences may polarize people of different faiths. The heightened religious tensions in Nigeria make it a critical case for studying the effectiveness of interreligious education in promoting peaceful coexistence, integration, and inclusion.

This manuscript examines the religious education curriculum in Nigeria to understand the role of religious discourse in the country's social, political, and educational life, as well as how students encounter religious traditions outside their own. The analysis will focus on two key aspects: first, how religious content is presented to students, and second, how well students are prepared to engage with differing truth claims both within and outside their own faith traditions. The authors advocate for a comprehensive curriculum that fosters open, respectful discussions about religious differences, promoting understanding within and between various faith traditions. Such a curriculum would aim to equip students to thoughtfully engage with the theological claims of other religious groups while respecting their own traditions and those of others. While religious conflicts have occurred across Nigeria, this study will focus specifically on select northern states: Kano, Sokoto, Borno, Kaduna, Katsina, and Plateau.

## Research Gap

There is a significant gap in existing research that focuses on peace education without the integration of interreligious education. Most studies, such as those by Nwaubani and Okafor (2015), which assess the moral relevance of peace education in Nigeria's social studies curricula, and Olowo (2016), which examines the effects of peace education integration in the Nigerian education system, primarily emphasize the peace education component. These studies argue for the role of peace education in fostering effective citizenship, moral values, and national unity, but they largely overlook the inclusion of interreligious education or the recognition of non-religious perspectives. Similarly, Ubogu's (2016) research discusses the importance of peace education in secondary schools, emphasizing the need to incorporate ethical codes like the Golden Rule for promoting peace and cultural harmony. While these studies do suggest incorporating ethical values into curricula, none of them specifically frame peace education through the lens of interreligious or irreligious perspectives. This omission represents a missed opportunity to deepen understanding and respect among diverse religious communities, highlighting the need for further research into how interreligious education could complement peace education in Nigeria's multi-religious society.

## Materials, Methods, Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework

This manuscript adopts a descriptive survey research design using secondary sources. Its methodology involves the systematic selection, collection, analysis, and summarization of existing data to examine characteristics, trends, and behaviors related to the political, social, and historical context of religious conflict in Nigeria, as well as the role of interreligious education. Secondary data sources, including government reports, academic publications, and religious education curricula, are critically evaluated for relevance, accuracy, and reliability. These sources are categorized and analyzed using descriptive methods to identify key patterns and trends. In evaluation of the curricula, the research methodology involved a thematic analysis of the structure, content, and objectives of the Christian and Islamic Religious Studies programs in Nigeria. This approach examined how each curriculum is organized around key themes, drawing from sacred texts to advance intellectual and moral development. It also analyzed the use of dynamic verbs that target cognitive and affective domains, as well as the socio-legal context within which the curricula operate, including alignment with constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and national educational policies. This analysis of existing religious education curricula explores their potential application in peacebuilding strategies, triangulating secondary data with primary research interviews to offer comprehensive insights into the intersection of education, religion, and conflict resolution. The states of Kano, Sokoto, Borno, Kaduna, Katsina, and Plateau were selected due to their prominence as sites of significant and

recurrent conflict in northern Nigeria (IRIN News, 2023; Nmah & Amanambu, 2017; Ushe, 2015; Isichei, 1987; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Campbell, 2014), as well as the need for a manageable sample size that could be implemented regionally prior to expansion throughout the entire country. Additionally, the primary author's familiarity with Northern Nigeria provides valuable contextual insight.

This study employs Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a framework for examining interreligious education as a tool for peacebuilding. Developed by Tajfel (1978) and Turner (1979), SIT explores how individuals derive their sense of self from group memberships and how these affiliations shape intergroup dynamics. In the context of interreligious education, SIT emphasizes the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison that influence in-group and out-group perceptions (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The Contact Hypothesis, proposed by Allport (1954), complements SIT by outlining conditions under which intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and foster positive relationships. It highlights the importance of equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support during interactions. Applied to interreligious education, these frameworks show how structured and meaningful intergroup engagement can challenge stereotypes, reduce in-group bias, and promote empathy. By combining SIT's insights into identity and group dynamics with the Contact Hypothesis' emphasis on optimal interaction conditions, interreligious education can transform perceptions, build mutual understanding, and support sustainable peacebuilding (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Regarding the pedagogical framework, the models of interreligious education in countries such as India (Mitra, 2019; Naeem & Yousaf, 2023) and Sweden (Niemi, 2020; Chorna, 2023) offer valuable insights for implementing similar initiatives in Nigeria, where religious diversity plays a crucial role in shaping societal dynamics. In India, despite inconsistent implementation, initiatives like interfaith dialogue within Islamic schools and the Radhakrishnan Commission's recommendation for comparative religious education showcase the potential of interreligious education to foster tolerance and understanding among diverse religious groups. Although these efforts have not been fully realized, they present a strong baseline for understanding the impact of interreligious education in promoting peace and unity. In Sweden, the non-confessional religious education system successfully exposes students to various religious beliefs and practices, thereby encouraging tolerance in a multicultural society. While challenges such as teacher training and resource availability persist, Sweden's approach demonstrates the effectiveness of secular, inclusive education in facilitating interreligious understanding. These examples can serve as a framework for Nigeria to develop an interreligious education system that promotes peacebuilding by integrating diverse religious perspectives, fostering respect, and cultivating shared values in a multi-religious society. By learning from these models, Nigeria

can adapt and expand its approach to interreligious education as a mechanism for long-term peace and social cohesion.

### **Limitations**

The descriptive survey research design using secondary data sources presents several limitations that must be carefully addressed. A major limitation is the potential unavailability or inaccessibility of relevant and up-to-date data, especially in regions with limited resources. To mitigate this, the researchers have sought multiple data sources, including government reports, academic publications, and resources from non-governmental organizations, and will provide transparency regarding any gaps in the data. Another limitation is the possible misalignment of secondary data with the specific research questions or study context, as data collected for different purposes may not fully align with the study's focus. This has been addressed by selecting closely aligned data sources and triangulating data from multiple perspectives to ensure a comprehensive view. Additionally, secondary data may contain inherent biases, particularly if collected with specific political or ideological objectives. To counter this, the researchers have assessed potential biases, used multiple sources to ensure balance, and will clearly acknowledge any identified biases. Thematic analysis of religious education curricula also presents certain limitations, particularly in its focus on textual content rather than practical implementation or outcomes. This method does not account for how curricula are interpreted and applied by teachers or received by students, which can significantly influence the effectiveness of religious education. Additionally, thematic analysis is limited in its ability to measure the real-world impact of curricula, such as changes in students' attitudes toward religious tolerance or peacebuilding. To address these limitations, this research incorporated a comparative approach, analyzing curricula alongside educational policy documents, and a carefully chosen set of primary source interviews with teachers and students. This triangulation of sources helps bridge the gap between curriculum content and its broader social and educational implications.

### **The Political, Social, and Historical Context of Religious Conflict in Nigeria**

A pivotal event in Nigerian history with profound political and religious consequences was the jihad that led to the conquest of the old Hausa city-states in Northern Nigeria (IRIN News, 2023). Initiated by the Fulani scholar Usman dan Fodio and supported by the indigenous Hausa people, this jihad took place in what was then the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria. The conflict stemmed from religious and political differences between the largely pagan Hausa and the Muslim Fulani. The jihad aimed to revitalize, purify, and strengthen Islam, positioning it as a central force in social and cultural life within Hausa communities.

Spanning approximately six years, this religious conflict affected much of northern Nigeria and extended into parts of southwestern Nigeria (Nmah & Amanambu, 2017).

The success of the jihad in these regions led to the establishment of a centralized system of government based on Islamic principles, replacing the decentralized political structures previously dominant among the Hausa people (Iweriebor, 1982). According to Barkindo and Dyikuk (2022), contemporary religious freedom violations in Nigeria can be traced to the religious jihad waged by Usman dan Fodio, whose legacy continues to shape the country's socio-religious tensions. This legacy is particularly evident in the growing discord between Muslim and Christian communities, especially in northern Nigeria, directly affected by the jihad. Following the conquest of the Hausa, the Fulani integrated their language and merged with the Hausa ruling class, forming the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group under the governance of what is now the Sokoto Caliphate (IRIN News, 2023). In contrast, southern Nigeria had established contact with Europeans as early as the 16th century.

With the onset of colonization, Christian missionaries played a significant role in proselytizing much of southern Nigeria (IRIN News, 2023). Before 1914, the British administered the Northern and Southern regions of Nigeria separately. However, in that year, Lord Frederick Lugard unified the two regions, creating the modern Nigerian state. This amalgamation was primarily driven by economic factors, as the Northern region was less resource-rich than the South (Southern Nigeria Protectorate, n.d.). Nevertheless, the unification had profound political ramifications. Its legacy continues to fuel debate in contemporary Nigeria, particularly regarding its enduring impact on the country's religious, social, and political landscapes.

Since gaining independence, Nigeria has struggled with political violence. The 1964 federal elections were widely perceived as fraudulent, with the ruling Northern People's Congress allegedly manipulating the results to favor their preferred candidate, leading to a widespread boycott. In 1966, Nigeria experienced its first violent government overthrow, carried out by military officers, predominantly from the Igbo ethnic group in the southern region, with one of their objectives being to end the political dominance of the Hausa-Fulani. This coup was followed by a bloody countercoup six months later, executed by Northern military officers, who launched an attack on the Igbo population in the North. The escalating violence culminated in the southern region's declaration of secession, triggering the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, which lasted from May 1967 to 1970. The conflict resulted in an estimated one million deaths (IRIN News, 2023).

In 1986, during General Ibrahim Babangida's regime, Nigeria became embroiled in a dispute over its potential membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This decision faced significant opposition from the Christian population, resulting in political unrest and further deepening religious divisions within the country. Critics argued that

Nigeria, as a secular state, should not align itself with the OIC, while Muslim supporters countered that such membership would not threaten the nation's secular status. Despite the heightened tensions, Nigeria ultimately became the 46th member of the OIC, a status it retains to this day (Aitah, n.d.). The severity of the unrest led the president to equate the situation with a civilian coup, underscoring the profound impact of the crisis on national stability (Ushe, 2015).

Religion remains a significant and influential factor in Nigeria's electoral system, particularly in the selection of presidential and gubernatorial candidates, as well as their deputies. This influence is often evident in the practice of the Muslim/Christian or Christian/Muslim ticket, where the president or governor is of one faith, and the deputy is from the other. This arrangement aims to ensure the representation of both religious groups, safeguarding the interests of their respective adherents. Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule, every administration has followed this model, with either a Christian president and Muslim vice president, or vice versa.

Religion also plays a pivotal role in electing leadership to the National Assembly, the country's highest legislative body. Campaigns and voting processes are often heavily influenced by religious considerations, with religious affiliation used to rally support for a candidate or discourage voters from supporting a particular individual. As a result, some Christian voters may be reluctant to support Muslim candidates for certain offices, and vice versa (Umeanolue, 2019). The Muslim/Christian ticket highlights the recognition of religion as a critical factor in the political landscape. However, it is important to note that this practice is not enshrined in the Constitution; rather, it has emerged as an informal but widely adopted strategy, shaped by the central role religion plays in Nigeria's political life and the desire to maintain a balance between the two dominant religious groups.

Religious conflicts in Nigeria can be traced to the post-independence era, often rooted in regional and ethnic divisions, with the underlying motivation being the control of political and economic resources. As religious sentiments gained traction, particularly in Northern Nigeria, they began to influence daily life, deepening the rift between various religious groups. One notable manifestation of this division was the Maitatsine conflict (Ushe, 2015). The Maitatsine conflict was a series of violent uprisings that occurred intermittently between 1980 and 1985, primarily affecting key states in Northern Nigeria, beginning with Kano, Borno, and Adamawa, and later spreading to other cities such as Jos, Bauchi, Kaduna, Zaria, and Sokoto. These disturbances resulted in substantial loss of life and property, further straining intergroup relations (Ojo, 1985). The term "Maitatsine" refers to the leader of the movement, Muhammadu Marwa, a Cameroonian-born religious teacher who had relocated to Kano. Marwa's teachings, deemed heretical by mainstream Islam, included claims of prophetic status and a rejection of affluence, Western materialism, and technological advancements. On December 18, 1980, Maitatsine and his followers took to

the streets in Kano, armed with weapons, leading to a violent confrontation. Maitatsine was killed during this uprising, and the aftermath resulted in a death toll of 4,177 individuals (Isichei, 1987).

Since 2010, insurgent groups, particularly Boko Haram, have seen a persistent and escalating rise in activity, becoming increasingly violent under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. After succeeding the original founder, Muhammed Yusuf, Shekau expanded the group's operations to include widespread bombings, territorial control, and cross-border attacks, especially in neighboring Cameroon. Boko Haram gained global notoriety for its brutality, including the use of women and children in suicide missions. The group garnered significant international attention in 2014 after abducting 276 girls from a school in Chibok, Borno State, an event that spurred the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

In 2015, Boko Haram rebranded itself as the Islamic State in West Africa (IS-WA) after Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. However, internal divisions caused a split within the group. A faction that recognized a different IS-WA member as its leader broke away, while Shekau's faction retained the name Boko Haram (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The group's leadership remains uncertain, with Abu Usama al Ansari often identified as its current leader. This splinter faction differentiated itself by targeting not only Christians and government officials but also Muslims, setting it apart from the original Boko Haram. It also adopted new tactics, such as kidnappings and the use of women and children in suicide attacks, strategies previously unseen in West Africa. The group's violent activities have been linked to radical Islamist networks in Algeria and Mali, particularly in the Sahel, though it operates largely autonomously and includes members from other countries like Chad and Niger (Campbell, 2014).

While Boko Haram predominantly operates in northeastern Nigeria, its impact is felt nationwide, particularly in areas like Plateau State, where long-standing ethnic and religious tensions have been exacerbated by the group's activities. Violence has caused widespread devastation, leading to thousands of deaths, the displacement of communities, and the destruction of property, leaving many unable to return home (Campbell, 2014). Inter-religious violence escalated notably across several northern states following the advocacy for the full implementation of Sharia law in 1999. Twelve out of Nigeria's 36 states adopted Sharia, all of which are in the northern part of the country. Kaduna State, with a roughly equal Muslim and Christian population, became a hotspot for violent clashes over the Sharia law's implementation (CSW, 2004). These religious tensions in Kaduna unfolded in two key phases.

The first phase of the violence occurred between February 21 and 25, 2000, after the state governor announced the adoption of Sharia law. Although the law was intended to apply



only to Muslims, it faced strong opposition from the Christian population, who feared its implementation would negatively affect them. This opposition also had a political dimension, as many Christians viewed the introduction of Sharia law as a method to reinforce the historical political dominance of the Muslim population in the north (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In response, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) organized a public protest in the state's capital, which was met with fierce resistance from Muslim youth. Violent confrontations ensued between the two groups, resulting in significant loss of life and property (Gold, 2022).

The violence not only caused extensive property damage but also resulted in significant displacement, creating a new population of internally displaced persons. In the aftermath, residential patterns in Kaduna became increasingly segregated, with Muslims and Christians retreating to areas predominantly occupied by individuals of the same faith. This shift deepened the divide between the two groups, further polarizing the community. The violence also had far-reaching consequences, spilling over into other parts of the country, particularly southeastern Nigeria. There, Christian ethnic groups, enraged by the killings of fellow Christians in Kaduna, retaliated by targeting Muslim populations in their own communities (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

The second major uprising in Kaduna, known as the "Miss World Riots," occurred in November 2002 and resulted in over 200 deaths. It is considered an extension of the ongoing Sharia conflict in the region (Ushe, 2015). The unrest was sparked by an article in a regional newspaper that suggested the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him) might have supported the Miss World competition scheduled to take place in Nigeria that December. Prior to the riots, smaller protests had been organized, mainly by conservative factions and the northern Muslim population, who opposed the event. The article, however, further inflamed tensions, leading to widespread outrage among Muslims. What began as a peaceful protest quickly escalated when radical youths took control of the demonstration. The situation deteriorated as the newspaper office was attacked and set ablaze, followed by indiscriminate violence against Christians. Christian homes, properties, schools, and churches were destroyed, and Muslims engaged in retaliatory violence. The riots continued for three days before armed forces intervened to restore order (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The social, political, and historical landscape of Northern Nigeria reveals a long history of conflict, often along regional, ethnic, and religious lines. Religious violence in the country is often driven by a cycle of retribution, which deepens tensions, fosters intolerance, and exposes citizens to further violence. The historical lack of trust and respect between religious groups has created deep-seated suspicion and segregation, making it difficult for people to live and settle freely in a multiethnic, multireligious society. Furthermore, the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism has led to the emergence of militant groups, further entrenching negative perceptions of other faiths. These challenges raise important

questions about how to rebuild mutual respect and understanding between religious communities in Nigeria, particularly given their contentious history. One potential solution is promoting rapprochement through education for reconciliation. The following chapters explore the introduction of interreligious education in school curricula as a means of fostering peacebuilding and re-establishing harmonious relations among Nigeria's diverse religious groups (Ushe, 2015).

### **History of Religious Education in Nigeria and Religiously Motivated Violence Within Schools**

Tracing the history of religious education within the Nigerian educational landscape is essential for understanding its impact and contemporary relevance. Education in Nigeria can be categorized into three main forms: Indigenous education, Qur'anic education, and Christian education. Indigenous education refers to the informal, community-based learning systems that existed before formal education was introduced. This education was typically delivered by community members and focused on practical skills relevant to the local environment. A central aspect of Indigenous education was the development of individual character, emphasizing ethical behavior, communal harmony, and peaceful coexistence (Ushe, 2015).

The second category, Qur'anic education, emerged in the Kanem-Bornu region in the late eleventh century with the introduction of Islam. By the thirteenth century, Kanem-Bornu had become a significant center of Islamic scholarship (Maigida, n.d.). The spread of Islam across northern Nigeria in the nineteenth century, particularly following the Fulani jihad led by Usman dan Fodio, further bolstered the Qur'anic education system. This jihad, which lasted approximately six years, was fueled by religious and political conflicts between the predominantly pagan Hausa and the Muslim Fulani. Its goal was to purify and strengthen Islamic practice through the Quran and Sharia law (Nmah & Amanambu, 2017).

The aftermath of the jihad saw the expansion of Qur'anic schools, with numbers reaching approximately 20,000 schools and 250,000 students by the early twentieth century. By the time Nigeria gained independence, the number of Qur'anic schools had grown to around 27,000, enrolling about 400,000 students (Ushe, 2015). The Qur'anic education system, later known as the Almajiri system, focused on learning to read and recite the Quran, understanding the Arabic language, and grounding students in Islamic moral teachings (Mohammed, 2015). However, during the colonial period, the system began to decline due to the British invasion, which undermined local leadership and cut off financial support for Qur'anic education. As a result, the Almajiri system faltered, leaving many students to beg on the streets or engage in menial labor for survival (Abdulqadir, 2003).

The third form of education in Nigeria, Christian education, is closely tied to the introduction of Western education. Although Christianity had a presence in Nigeria as early as the sixteenth century, it did not establish deep roots until the efforts of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. The first Christian primary school was founded in 1843 by the Methodist mission, followed by the establishment of the first Christian secondary school in Lagos in 1876. The curriculum in these schools was grounded in Christian principles, with Christian Religious Education (CRE) serving as a core subject (Ayanleke, 2021). Ayanleke (2021) references Falade (2016), stating, "Since then, Christian religious knowledge (CRK) has been one of the school subjects in Nigeria." Following Nigeria's independence, the number of missionary schools grew, and Christian Religious Education remained compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools to promote moral and Christian values among students.

Christian religious education in Nigeria established deep roots through the collaborative efforts of the colonial government and Christian missionary organizations. These efforts were often led by the dominant religious groups in specific regions, which contributed to the evolution of religious education over time (Tola, 2007). Despite its significant contributions, Christian religious education has faced persistent challenges that have hindered its effectiveness and relevance.

One major issue is the challenge of sponsorship. Financial constraints are a recurring problem, often arising from changes in government. When new administrations inherit significant debts or face fiscal limitations upon assuming office, the resources allocated to Christian religious education become insufficient (Kallah, 2022). Another critical challenge is the shortage of qualified teaching staff. This shortage may result from a lack of interest in religious education as a career, partly due to the comparatively lower financial incentives in this field. Additionally, the inadequacy of the curriculum presents significant hurdles. The curriculum often fails to align with global trends in religious studies and does not adequately address the growing concerns about religious diversity in Nigeria. Despite periodic updates, the curriculum retains redundant themes that fail to address both national and international religious issues effectively. Consequently, there is an urgent need for continuous reevaluation and proper implementation to ensure the curriculum remains relevant and impactful (Kallah, 2022).

Islamic religious education in Nigeria faces significant challenges, largely due to systemic neglect by government authorities, school administrators, and societal attitudes. Successive governments have prioritized Western education, often associated with Christianity, while marginalizing Islamic education. Additionally, school administrators have misappropriated funds intended for the establishment and upkeep of Qur'anic schools, worsening the difficulties in sustaining Islamic education (Kazeem & Balogun, 2013). A major issue within Islamic education is the Almajiri system, which many scholars argue is no

longer effective. This system leaves children vulnerable to violence, kidnapping, and starvation. Those who survive often lack employable skills, pushing them into menial labor. Abdulqadir (2003) refers to these children as "untrained armies," potentially becoming tools for social unrest, harboring resentment against parents, authorities, and society. The Almajiri system is also exploited by extremist groups, who target vulnerable youths for radicalization, using them for violent activities (Enweonwu, Ernest, & Ezeanya, 2022).

The challenges faced by both Christian and Islamic religious education underscore the complex barriers hindering their effective implementation in Nigeria. A significant issue affecting both systems is religious exclusion, where minority religious groups are marginalized within the educational framework. In some cases, religious classes for minority groups are removed from the curriculum, or students are forced to attend the classes of the majority religious group. As Tuduks (2021) explains, religious exclusion is deeply rooted in the dynamics between majority and minority groups in specific regions. This exclusion disrupts the educational environment, fostering religious biases among students and undermining the harmonious coexistence essential in a pluralistic society.

The Nigerian educational system has witnessed significant instances of violence, driven by various factors that contribute to these conflicts. Often perpetrated by students, these violent acts have had severe negative impacts on both teaching and learning. The disruption of academic activities frequently leads to school closures, which in turn results in stagnated academic progress and adverse health effects for teachers, who are unable to fulfill their duties during these periods (Ayuba & Wakawa, 2023). The following educational surveys document instances of religious conflicts among students and identify the underlying factors contributing to this violence.

Hackett (2001) highlights that religiously motivated violence involving students has been a recurring issue in Nigeria's educational institutions since 1980. A notable example of such conflict is the debate over the wearing of hijabs by Muslim students. In July 1987, a school in a predominantly Christian city in Northern Nigeria became the site of a heated dispute when Muslim female students pushed for the inclusion of hijabs in the school dress code. The proposal faced strong opposition from Christian students, who argued that allowing the hijab would escalate religious tensions in an already volatile region. The failure to reach a resolution led to the closure of the school twice due to escalating student aggression. This incident illustrates how students' religious affiliations can spark significant division and conflict in educational settings (Makhasane, Onaolapo, & Onaolapo, 2023; Hackett, 2001). Makhasane et al. (2023) identified several factors contributing to religious conflict in Nigerian schools, including religious intolerance, poor communication, a lack of sensitivity to religious diversity, and disputes over school dress codes. Religious violence has also been fueled by the misuse of sacred religious symbols. One such incident occurred in February

2006 in Bauchi, when a Christian teacher allegedly confiscated a Koran from a Muslim student, triggering violent protests, killings, and the destruction of churches. Similar cases of mob violence and lynching of teachers, often by Muslim students accusing them of disrespecting the Koran, have also been reported (Tola, 2007).

A particularly harrowing instance of religious violence occurred on May 12, 2022, when Deborah Yakubu, a student, was murdered by her classmates over an allegedly blasphemous voice recording attributed to her. The incident followed her reportedly derogatory comments about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) in a class social media group. A mob attacked Deborah, throwing stones and chanting "Allahu Akbar" before killing her and setting her body on fire. Although two suspects were arrested, they were released after Muslim youths protested for their acquittal. The release followed the prosecution's failure to attend the court hearing and a lack of sufficient evidence, despite video footage showing the attackers and Deborah's charred remains (Jubilee Campaign USA, 2023; The Guardian, 2022). This case highlights the deep religious divisions among students, where accusations of blasphemy and demands for religious freedom can lead to extreme violence and intolerance.

### **The Development and Implications of Religious Studies Curricula in Nigeria**

The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) was established in 1988 through the merger of four institutions. It is responsible for developing, producing, evaluating, and improving curricula at all levels of Nigeria's educational system (Mumini & Hussaini, 2021). The NERDC plays a key role in shaping national educational standards and policies. Nigeria's educational structure includes a one-year pre-primary program, six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, and three years of senior secondary education. Primary education caters to children aged 6 to 12, junior secondary to those aged 13 to 15, and senior secondary to students aged 16 to 18 (Imam, 2012). This study focuses on the curriculum for the first nine years of formal education, encompassing primary and junior secondary education for students aged 6 to 15.

In 2010, a Presidential Summit on Education highlighted the need to revise and streamline the national curriculum, particularly at the elementary level. The goal was to reduce the number of subjects while maintaining high-quality education and aligning with global standards. Following the summit's recommendations, the NERDC initiated the development of a revised curriculum. This led to the integration of five previously separate subjects—Social Studies, Civic Education, Islamic Studies, Christian Religious Studies, and Security Education—into a single subject now called Religion and National Values Education (Mumini & Hussaini, 2021).

By 2014, the revised curriculum was implemented in public and private primary and junior secondary schools nationwide (Mumini & Hussaini, 2021). However, its introduction sparked

significant controversy, particularly regarding the merging of religious studies with other subjects. Critics expressed concerns about the potential marginalization of specific religious teachings. For example, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) criticized the new curriculum, fearing it would diminish Christian studies in higher education and might be seen as an attempt to promote Islam as the dominant religion in the country (Vanguard, 2017). Similarly, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) objected, arguing that the revised curriculum disproportionately affected Christian Religious Studies, while Islamic Religious Studies remained largely unaffected. CAN claimed that students were being forced to study content contrary to their beliefs and called for the separation of religious studies from the merged curriculum, urging a return to the previous structure (Adedigba, 2017).

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping Nigeria's political and social landscape. Therefore, it is crucial to assess how religious education is integrated into the country's educational system. At the Primary 1–3 level, students are required to study a minimum of six subjects, with a maximum of seven. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) combines religious education, civic education, and social studies into one subject titled Religion and National Values. However, these areas are taught as distinct themes within the curriculum. Separate classes are designated for Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS), catering to the respective faiths. Arabic language is offered as an optional subject and is also incorporated into the IRS curriculum. Despite this, there has been significant opposition to the inclusion of Arabic, particularly due to concerns that no other major Nigerian languages receive similar emphasis, which could help foster national unity (NERDC, n.d.; Asue & Kajo, 2018).

The curriculum for Primary 4–6 closely mirrors that of Primary 1–3, with slight variations. At this level, students are required to study at least seven subjects, with a maximum of eight. As in the earlier grades, religious education, civic education, and social studies are grouped under the umbrella term "Religion and National Values." Arabic remains an optional subject and is included within the IRS curriculum. Some Christian religious organizations have raised concerns about the continued inclusion of Arabic, particularly since no other languages are similarly offered as optional (NERDC, n.d.; Asue & Kajo, 2018).

At the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level (JSS 1–3), students must take at least nine subjects, with a maximum of ten. Religious education remains a part of the curriculum, as it is at the primary level. However, Christian organizations have voiced concerns about its implementation in northern Nigeria. They argue that some Muslim school administrators make minimal efforts to teach French, leading to students being required to learn Arabic instead (NERDC, n.d.; Asue & Kajo, 2018). In northern regions, religiously affiliated schools often modify the curriculum, omitting religious education that does not align with their

doctrinal beliefs. These schools, authorized by the Ministry of Education, can prioritize either CRS or IRS based on their religious orientation (Fwangshak, 2024).

In schools where both CRS and IRS are taught, instruction is typically delivered simultaneously by different teachers. This arrangement often leads to adherents of one faith being unable to attend the religious classes of the other. In many cases, students of one faith are required to leave the classroom when the religious education of the other is being taught (Dawa, 2024). This underscores the influence of a school's religious background on the implementation of religious education. Depending on the school's orientation, administrators may choose to teach CRS, IRS, or both, based on the religious affiliations of the students.

### **Content Analysis of Christian and Islamic Religious Studies Curriculum**

In the following analysis, a thematic approach is applied to evaluate the Christian and Islamic Religious Studies curricula within Nigeria's educational framework. This methodology examines the key themes, sub-themes, and underlying principles that shape the religious education provided at various academic stages. The analysis focuses on how the curricula are designed to impart religious knowledge, moral values, and spiritual guidance to students while considering their alignment with Nigeria's multi-religious context. Additionally, it explores the pedagogical strategies used, highlighting both strengths and limitations, particularly in terms of fostering interreligious understanding and promoting inclusivity in religious education.

The Christian Religious Studies curriculum for Primary 1-3 is structured around several key themes, each containing various sub-themes. The first theme focuses on God's goodness as the creator of the universe, using selected Bible verses to demonstrate how God addresses human needs. A central aspect of the curriculum is the narrative of Jesus Christ, covering His birth, life, ministry, and death. The curriculum also emphasizes God as a Father and encourages students to understand God through Jesus and prayer, fostering a personal relationship with Jesus as a friend and brother. Additionally, the fulfillment of God's promise to humanity through Abraham is highlighted (Federal Ministry of Education & Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2007).

For Primary 4-6, the Christian Religious Studies curriculum builds upon the foundation established in earlier stages. It is divided into 17 sub-themes, covering topics such as God's goodness, knowing God through our relationship with others; this sub-theme is further divided into two topics: God and our talents and Kindness to others. In exploring these topics, the students are expected to "define who a neighbor is, identify people in the community in need of our help, and list ways they can help the needy around them". Holy Spirit working in us, God as Father guides his children, and Living as a Christian are other sub-themes that are expected to be taught. These themes aim to instill Christian moral

values and guide students in developing ethical and spiritual principles (Federal Ministry of Education & Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2007).

At the junior secondary school level, the curriculum for Christian Religious Studies follows a similar approach but expands its scope. In the first year, the focus is on selected Old Testament themes, including God and His creation, Relationship with God and Man; this theme is further divided into four topics: Relationship in the family, Relationship in school, Relationship in the community and church, and Relationship with God. Students are expected to “identify roles of members of the family, explain why they should choose and maintain good friends, state ways we maintain relationship in the community, and mention ways we maintain relationship with God”. The second-year shifts to the New Testament, covering the early life of Jesus, His ministry, death, resurrection, and the formation of the early church, including selected passages from the Acts of the Apostles. In the third year, the focus is on the teachings of the Apostle Paul and the role of the Christian church in contemporary society (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2024).

The curricula at all levels are grounded in biblical texts, which serve as the foundation for religious instruction. There is also a clear emphasis on integrating Christian moral, social, and spiritual values into the educational process. Given Nigeria's multi-religious context, the inclusion of religious education in the national curriculum is essential. Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom, allowing individuals to receive religious instruction according to their faith or the belief system of their parents (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This legal framework enables curriculum developers to create and implement religious education curricula that cater to the diverse religious groups in the country. Moreover, the Christian religious education curriculum aligns with Nigeria's broader educational goals, as outlined in the National Policy on Education, which emphasizes national consciousness, socio-cultural development, and respect for diverse beliefs and practices (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2024).

The Islamic Religious Studies curriculum is structured around six key categories: the Arabic Alphabet, Qur'an, Hadith, Tawhid, Fiqh, Sirah, and Tahdhib. The emphasis on these categories is rooted in the necessity for students to learn Arabic to understand and access the Qur'an, which serves as the moral and spiritual guide for Muslims. The Hadith complements the Qur'an by elaborating on its core principles, while Tawhid focuses on the fundamental beliefs of Islam. Fiqh covers the rules of formal worship and legal matters, Sirah examines the life of Prophet Muhammad, and Tahdhib addresses the social and moral teachings found in both the Qur'an and Hadith (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2018). These categories are further subdivided into various topics to



enhance students' understanding, including memorizing and reciting Surahs from the Qur'an.

The curriculum for Islamic Religious Studies in Primary 4-6 follows a structure like that of Primary 1-3, covering topics like memorizing and reciting Surahs from the Qur'an, and under the Tawhid and Fiqh section, topics such as Belief in Angels and their function, Belief in the Glorious book, Faraid, Sunan and Mustahabbat of Wudu are expected to be taught. The Sirah and Tahdhib are introduced to deepen students' understanding of their faith as it covers topics such as the short history of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Hijrah to his death, Trustworthiness, Islamic rules of conduct: Brotherhood, and a short history and activities of the rightly guided Caliphs: Abubakar Bin Abi Quhafah and Umar bin Khattab. (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, n.d.).

Both the Christian and Islamic Religious Studies curricula follow a confessional approach, focusing primarily on advancing the knowledge and practice of their respective religions. The learning objectives in both curricula include dynamic verbs like "list," "explain," "identify," and "recognize," which describe the cognitive domain and foster intellectual development and critical thinking. Additionally, verbs such as "show respect," "practice," and "develop" align with the affective domain, emphasizing the importance of values, attitudes, and emotional responses (Ihedinma, 2004).

Despite the emphasis on faith-based education, a major limitation of the current curricula is their lack of focus on interreligious understanding. In Nigeria's multi-religious society, where various religious traditions coexist, the curricula primarily focus on the study of a single religion. This exclusion of the "religious other" limits students' exposure to diverse perspectives, which is crucial for fostering mutual respect and tolerance in a pluralistic society. To address these concerns, the curriculum should be restructured to incorporate learning about other religions, allowing students to develop a broader understanding of global religious diversity. Such an approach would support peacebuilding and conflict resolution, especially in a nation dealing with ethnic, religious, and political conflicts. The curricula should promote open-mindedness, mutual understanding, and respect for religious differences, in line with the broader educational goals of enhancing social cohesion and national unity (Federal Ministry of Education & Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2007).

While the Christian and Islamic Religious Studies curricula are effective in promoting faith-based education and moral development, there is an urgent need for a more inclusive approach that encompasses the study of diverse religious traditions. This would better prepare students for life in a multi-religious society and contribute to a more peaceful and harmonious Nigeria.

### **The Role of Inter-religious Education for Peace Building in Northern Nigeria**

The pivotal role of educational institutions in shaping resilience to confront both external and internal forces that resist pluralism, as well as those that sustain exclusion and violence, cannot be overstated. Education profoundly influences individual development, either promoting or preventing prejudice, while fostering tolerance. Students often internalize lessons from the classroom that endure throughout their lives, with learning extending beyond the formal educational environment (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016).

Having previously analyzed the two religious educational curricula, we can now explore the potential of Inter-Religious Education (IRE) when integrated into school curricula. This approach could foster tolerance and effectively address religious and cultural diversity, counteracting prejudiced beliefs and violence. Ultimately, IRE can create a safe space for peacebuilding, contributing to the development of cohesive societies.

To begin, it is essential to clarify the meaning and scope of Inter-Religious Education (IRE). Schweitzer defines IRE as “an exemplary approach to dealing with the foreign Other” (Kolb, 2021). IRE is often closely linked with Intercultural Education, which Milton Bennett, as cited by Mohammed and Renáta, describes as the process of increasing awareness of one's subjective cultural context (worldview), including one's own, and developing the competence to interact sensitively and effectively across cultural boundaries. Both IRE and Intercultural Education aim to foster understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion, thereby shaping relationships among individuals of different religious backgrounds (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016).

In essence, Inter-Religious Education (IRE) equips students to navigate environments where multiple religions coexist. However, there is no universally accepted model for the development or implementation of inter-religious education, which presents a significant challenge. Potential models for Nigeria include the theoretic-conceptual model and didactic or methodological approaches (Kolb, 2021). Selecting the most suitable model would require further research, but it is essential to consider the specific context of the society—its educational, historical, and geographical factors, along with other local and global influences—when developing an effective and adaptable inter-religious education curriculum. Contextual considerations and adjustments to reflect societal trends are key to the success of such a framework (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016).

In the pursuit of sustainable development within any society, the importance of peacebuilding in conflict-ridden and divided societies cannot be overstated. Conflicts, often rooted in economic, political, ethnic, and religious issues, hinder societal growth and progress. Addressing the primary drivers of such conflicts requires promoting effective dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting parties, which can be achieved through educating the public on peacebuilding and conflict-resolution strategies (Adepoju &

Adelekun, 2022). In response to persistent conflicts and unrest, there has been growing advocacy for the integration of peace education into national curricula. In October 2023, experts from across Nigeria gathered for a two-day event in Lagos, led by the Federal Ministry of Education, where the critical need for peace education was affirmed. Discussions focused on developing the country's first national peace education curriculum, aimed at addressing conflicts and violent historical events (UNESCO, n.d.). Nwakpa (2015) suggests that a Peace Education Curriculum should include themes such as conflict resolution, democracy, human rights, love, forgiveness, tolerance, piety, obedience, care, and patriotism to foster a peaceful and progressive society. In faith-based schools, where peace clubs have been introduced to promote peace education, significant positive changes have been observed in students' lives (Njobati, 2021).

Additionally, the introduction of interfaith or inter-religious dialogue as a peacebuilding strategy has been a key initiative implemented by the Nigerian government. This approach aims to resolve conflicts between religious groups and promote peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit. Several national organizations and agencies have been tasked with fostering inter-religious dialogue, including the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), the Advisory Council for Religious Affairs in Nigeria, the National Conference on Religions in Ibadan, the Nigerian Interfaith Action Association (NIFAA), the Centre for Interfaith Relations and Outreach in Ogbomosho, and the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). Of these, NIREC stands out due to its government support, funding, and mandate to promote dialogue and concrete actions aimed at improving interactions between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. However, despite its importance, NIREC has faced criticism, particularly regarding the lack of female representation, its exclusion of other faiths, and its tendency to foster defensive positions rather than promote mutual understanding between its Christian and Muslim members (Williams, 2023).

At the state level, significant peacebuilding initiatives have been launched in Northern Nigeria. Between 2016 and 2018, states such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Adamawa established peace commissions to address the root causes of conflict. These agencies—the Plateau Peace Building Agency, Kaduna State Peace Commission, and Adamawa State Agency for Peace—have worked diligently to resolve conflicts at the grassroots level, preventing the escalation of ethnic, religious, and political tensions. They have initiated dialogue programs and collaborated with civil society organizations and NGOs to promote conflict resolution through dialogue, understanding, and cooperation, fostering peaceful and cohesive societies. However, despite their positive contributions, financial constraints and a lack of independence from state governors have limited the effectiveness of these agencies (Kew, 2021).

In Nigeria, Christian Religious Studies and Islamic Religious Studies are the two primary religious subjects included in the national curriculum. This confessional model of religious

education, which separates Christian and Muslim students into distinct subjects, is explicitly supported by the Nigerian constitution (1999). Section 38, subsection 2 of the constitution states, "No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony, or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian." This confessional model, however, has faced criticism for not adequately addressing the country's multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious composition. A more inclusive approach, such as inter-religious education, is often proposed. Yet, Nigeria's history of tensions between religious groups complicates the development and implementation of an unbiased, objective inter-religious curriculum. Religious communities express concern that inter-religious education could lead to conversion or proselytization, potentially alienating parents, guardians, and other religious groups. One suggested solution is for schools operated by specific religious groups to invite instructors from other faiths to teach, allowing students to learn about other religions in a balanced way without compromising their beliefs. However, this becomes more complex in private religious institutions, such as church-owned universities, where students are required to adhere strictly to the institution's religious teachings. This dynamic further deepens the divide between religious groups (Kushimo, 2020).

Despite the challenges, the potential benefits of inter-religious education are significant. When properly implemented, it can foster mutual understanding of different religious traditions while allowing students to maintain their own faith. This approach should emphasize universal values such as peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity, which are essential for building a stable and harmonious society (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016). While the implementation of inter-religious education in Nigeria may face substantial obstacles, it remains a crucial strategy for preparing students to navigate and thrive in a diverse and pluralistic society.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

Building on the discussion of the potential benefits and challenges associated with implementing interreligious education in peacebuilding, the following practical recommendations are made for the successful integration of interreligious education within the Nigerian context:

1. **Introduction of Interreligious Education at the Primary School Level:** This study advocates for the introduction and effective teaching of interreligious education from the primary school level. At an early stage, children should be exposed to principles of tolerance, unity in diversity, and social and religious values that foster peace and harmony—values essential for the development and progress of Nigeria. Given the

significant role that religion plays in Nigerian society, as reflected in the inclusion of religious education for Christianity and Islam in the national curriculum, it is vital to incorporate the moral teachings from various religious traditions into educational practices. This would promote national unity while fostering mutual understanding of other religions. Importantly, interreligious education should provide space for students to retain their own faith while emphasizing universal values such as peace and tolerance, integral to social cohesion in a diverse society like Nigeria.

2. **Teacher Training and Development:** One of the major challenges facing religious education, and by extension interreligious education, is the shortage of qualified teachers and inadequate funding. To address this issue, it is essential for the government to invest in training and development programs for teachers. These initiatives could include subsidized or free training opportunities and institutions focused on preparing teachers who are skilled in facilitating interreligious education. Well-trained educators will play a crucial role in preparing students to coexist peacefully in a society with diverse religious traditions, thus ensuring the successful integration of interreligious education.
3. **Development of an Inclusive and Balanced Curriculum:** In the development of an interreligious education curriculum, it is vital to adopt pragmatic, inclusive, and balanced teaching methods. These methods should be free from religious fanaticism, sectional polarization, cultural distortion, and ethnic parochialism. The curriculum's success can only be assured if it reflects a genuine desire to learn from and about the "Other," without the underlying aim of proselytization. It should be designed to promote open-minded, respectful, and objective learning, fostering dialogue and understanding between different religious groups.
4. **Utilizing Nigeria's Socio-Cultural and Ethnoreligious Diversity:** While recognizing the differences between the socio-cultural and ethnoreligious contexts of the West and Nigeria, it is crucial to acknowledge and appropriately utilize the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and opinions within Nigerian classrooms. This diversity can serve as a resource for fostering constructive discussions about beliefs and values. Students should be encouraged to engage ethically with differences, inquire about the beliefs of others with sensitivity, and share and learn from each other in a spirit of mutual respect. Employing varied teaching methods, strategies, and structured activities can facilitate meaningful interreligious learning experiences, enabling students to engage successfully with the complexities of religious diversity and coexistence.

This research investigates the factors contributing to conflict in Nigeria, with a particular emphasis on the role of religious education in exacerbating tensions. It reveals that Nigeria, particularly in its northern regions, is deeply divided along ethnic, regional, and religious lines, where historical mistrust and violence have hindered peaceful coexistence. A key

finding is the inadequacy of Nigeria's religious education frameworks, specifically in Christianity and Islam, which fail to foster meaningful engagement with religious "Others." This lack of interreligious dialogue in educational systems has deepened divisions and reinforced negative stereotypes between religious communities.

Through an analysis of Nigeria's national curricula, it becomes clear that current religious education practices do not promote mutual respect, understanding, or tolerance. This research advocates for the integration of interreligious education into the national curriculum, suggesting it could serve as a powerful tool to bridge existing divides. By incorporating teachings that encourage respect and dialogue between religious groups, the curriculum would enable students to engage with different religious perspectives while maintaining their own beliefs. Ultimately, this reform could contribute to a more peaceful and cohesive society, where religious diversity is embraced, and long-standing conflicts are mitigated.

However, there remains a significant gap in research on the impact of interreligious education in the Nigerian context, particularly empirical studies that examine its potential to foster peace and reduce interreligious tensions. Future research should explore the practical implementation of interreligious education and assess its long-term effects on students' attitudes, behaviors, and interfaith relationships. Such studies would provide valuable evidence to guide curriculum development and policymaking, ensuring that interreligious education effectively contributes to national unity and conflict resolution.

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