

**CONTESTING THE PUBLIC SPACE: RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND  
PUBLIC SPACE USE IN SELECTED TOWNS IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although public spaces are physical and social spaces that are open and accessible to the public, they are often appropriated by different groups for private use, including religious groups. As expected, religious activities are supposed to be held in a solemn environment devoid of the features of public space. Therefore, this article discusses why religious institutions appropriate public spaces for their activities and the consequences of the practice and its implications on inter-religious harmony, applying social identity theory as a framework. The study was conducted in purposively selected towns in Oyo State, Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were gathered through interviews and non-participant observation of religious activities in public spaces. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The study unravels that the performance of religious obligations, the quest for public awareness and identity, safeguarding against domination by others, and the exercise of the constitutional right to public worship are the motivations for the religious use of public spaces. However, latent intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts are the consequences of space contestation by faith-based organisations. The paper concludes that the use of public space by religious institutions engenders negative inter-religious harmony and recommends that the government should enforce strict regulations on religious use of public space in Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Public Space, Religious Conflict, Social Identity Theory, Nigeria.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Religious groups across the globe exhibit a notable inclination to utilise public spaces for their activities, often behaving as though these spaces were primarily designated for religious purposes. However, this practice is associated with countries where religious freedom is not significantly restricted. For instance, in Nigeria, the three dominant religious groups, including Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), frequently engage in public spaces to carry out a broad range of religious activities. This tendency often leads to interfaith disharmony and tensions among adherents of these faiths (Ojo, 2019). Furthermore, Gbadegesin (2013) identifies four ways by which the faith communities of Islam and Christianity make use of space, including political space, economic space, media space, and geographic or physical space. He opines that apart from physical space, all the others can plunge Nigeria into national crises if improperly handled by the government. Similarly, Adeboye (2012) highlights how Pentecostal Christianity has achieved significant visibility by extensively leveraging media technologies for proselytisation and by appropriating public spaces for worship. The scholar further argues that the intrusion of Pentecostal practices into public areas traditionally considered secular often results in conflicts with other users of these spaces.

Given that religion is inherently sacred, it is logical to expect that religious practices should take place in sacred or designated spaces. Kimball (2002) emphasises that religion typically revolves around sacred narratives, sacred spaces, and sacred individuals. Similarly, Fleming and O'Hara (1995) state that a core element of religious practice involves congregants gathering in sacred buildings to express their faith through worship and celebration. This is because religion, by its nature, involves communication, which cannot be practised by an individual but by a group of people. Hence, it is often regarded as a group activity (Ayantayo, 2023). Consequently, sacred space is a vital component of religious life, implying that religious activities should ideally be confined to private or designated areas rather than public spaces. However, the reality is that many religious rituals and activities spill beyond the boundaries of private spaces into public domains. This phenomenon, coupled with the conflicts that arise from using public spaces for religious purposes, particularly among followers of different faiths, makes investigating the factors behind this tendency a compelling endeavour.

Despite the existing research on the religious use of public spaces, few studies adequately address why religious groups are drawn to these spaces, the consequences, and overall implications on inter-religious peace and harmony in Oyo State, south-west Nigeria, where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions are practised side by side and openly in the public space.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative research conducted in Oyo State, Nigeria, purposively selected for the distinct characteristics that make it a relevant site for this investigation. These include high levels of religiosity, frequent public religious demonstrations, and the presence of Nigeria's three dominant religious traditions: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Among the various African Traditional Religion variants, the *Egúngún* and *Orò* traditions were specifically chosen due to their visible and overt expressions in public spaces. Their respective adherents constitute the study population. The study focused on four key locations within Oyo State, including Ibadán, Igbo-Ora, Iseyin, and Ogbomoso. The towns were chosen because of their documented histories of religious conflicts stemming from public space usage by faith-based groups.

Given the study's emphasis on people's beliefs, experiences, and practices, data collection involved in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and non-participant observation of religious events occurring in public spaces. A total of 53 interviews were conducted with purposively selected religious leaders and followers in this order: 20 Muslims, 20 Christians, and 10 adherents of African Traditional Religion (5 each for *Egúngún* and *Orò*) across the study areas. The proportional allocation of respondents reflects the relative population sizes of the religious groups in Oyo State (Nolte et al., 2009). Additionally, key informant interviews (KII) were conducted with 3 chairpersons of landlords' associations to provide broader perspectives on the study. The interviews were unstructured to accommodate the varied literacy levels of participants and were conducted in English and Yoruba.

The data were analysed thematically through content analysis, which was a group-based inference due to the homogeneity in the views of the interview respondents. The process involved carefully editing field notes to extract relevant information, transcribing recorded interviews, and coding the responses to identify recurring themes. This analysis was further validated through observational data, providing a robust and comprehensive understanding of

the phenomenon under study. Ethical standards for social science research were strictly adhered to throughout the process by ensuring that the consent of the participants was obtained and a high level of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy was maintained.

## **CONCEPTUALISING PUBLIC SPACE**

Public space is a multi-disciplinary concept that has garnered significant interest from scholars across various fields, including Philosophy, Social Studies, Visual Arts, Cultural Studies, and Urban Studies. Consequently, a universally agreed-upon definition remains elusive. Political scientists, geographers, sociologists, and religious studies experts have all investigated how public spaces are constructed, managed, and function in religious, economic, political, and social contexts. Due to these diverse perspectives, the interpretation of public space varies across disciplines.

Broadly speaking, public space can be conceptualised as an imaginary arena where societal dynamics play out, or as a tangible, physical space where social interactions and political activities occur (Mitchell, 1995). Neil (2010) identifies three primary perspectives through which public space can be examined: legal-economic, socio-spatial, and political. The legal-economic perspective concerns the funding and ownership of public spaces. The socio-spatial perspective addresses the physical attributes and utilisation of these spaces. The political perspective emphasises the role of public spaces in democracy, particularly as venues for interaction, empowerment, and civic engagement. This notion is closely related to Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere as an abstract, universal realm where democratic processes unfold. Neil's perspectives offer insights into how public spaces function. Given the interdisciplinary nature of public space, Shepard and Smithsimon (2011) synthesise various definitions in their comprehensive characterisation of public spaces as "responsive, democratic, and meaningful places that protect the rights of user groups. They are accessible to all and provide freedom of action while allowing temporary claims and ownership. A public space can be altered through action because it is collectively owned by everyone (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011, 4).

This definition highlights three fundamental characteristics of public spaces: the inalienable right of individuals or groups to utilise these spaces, which affirms their inclusivity by providing opportunities for different individuals and groups to interact and engage with each other. The second is their accessibility to all. This implies that public spaces are open to all

persons irrespective of identity, social status, or opinion. Nevertheless, some scholars opine that accessibility of public space to all members of the public is in principle and not necessarily in practice (Neil 2009). This suggests that inclusive accessibility of public space may be unrealistic at times, which is supported by Shepard and Smithsimon that accessibility of persons to the public space can be restricted. A factor that could cause this is that during an emergency, the government imposes a restriction order or a curfew. The third characteristic is collective ownership, which suggests that it is a domain that is publicly owned as opposed to private ownership. While some scholars do not support a distinction between public and private public spaces (Lawuyi 2012a), others make a clear distinction. Hence, to Carmona, Magalhaes, and Hammonda,

Public space relates to all those parts of the built and natural environment, public and private, internal and external, urban and rural, where the public has free, although not necessarily unrestricted, access. It encompasses: all the streets, squares and other rights of way, whether predominantly in residential, commercial or community/civic uses; the open spaces and parks; the open countryside; the 'public/private' spaces both internal and external where public access is welcome- if controlled- such as private shopping centres or rail and bus stations; and the interiors of key public and civic buildings such as libraries (Carmona, Magalhaes and Hammonda, 2008, p. 5)

To further underscore the oneness of private and public spaces, Parkinson (2012) also declares that there exists no distinction between them because the distinction melts into some issues that are of less importance to each of them. To him, the idea of accessibility has to do with where what happens in the public space can be observed by all.

However, this definition is particularly relevant to this study, as it underscores the ability of religious organisations to access public spaces for their activities. Similarly, Parkinson (2012) identifies key features of public spaces, including government oversight in their creation and management, their unrestricted accessibility for the benefit of all, and their collective ownership. However, despite collective ownership, perceptions of public space among different groups can vary significantly, sometimes leading to conflict (Crawford, 1995; Mitchell, 1995; Oricco, 2011). In other words, individuals' perception of public space determines how they put it to use, which often puts them on a collision course with other contending users of the space. Hence, Oricco argues that:

As scholars grapple with debates on public space, they must address the ways in which people understand, use, and identify space. Claims to space are often made on

the basis of the meanings that people attach to space; that is, they understand and interpret a given space in some way that is meaningful for their lives and interests. As such, conflicts that arise over space become embedded in larger debates about interpreting the meanings of place (Oricco, 2011, p. 5).

Different interpretations of what constitutes space inform how it is utilised by different persons or groups, which may or may not precipitate conflict. That was why Mitchell asked some question about the role of public space: “Is public space about order and control, in which the need for safety is prioritised, or is it about free interaction, even if that comes with conflict, violence, and danger?” (cited in Orrico, 2011, p. 4). The answers to these posers are simply that public space is often characterised by the two questions, suggesting that it is not static but dynamic in line with how it is perceived by its users. The different perceptions could be contradictory and therefore prone to conflict because of “an attempt to use space in the way that a person or group sees it... may be different from the way other stakeholders see it” (Ojo, 2019, p. 14).

Therefore, there is a growing concern over how public spaces are used, especially who “owns” them and how different groups use them. Such spaces, open to everyone, often become arenas where various publics challenge existing rules, moral codes, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. These disputes can both spark change and fuel conflict, which is why public space is seen as a contested terrain (Alubo, 2011). In short, public spaces are collectively owned, universally accessible areas that different groups can use in diverse ways. Religious organisations, for example, engage with or sometimes contest these spaces for their purposes, leading to a range of outcomes. In a multi-religious environment, how faith communities occupy and use public spaces can have significant implications for inter-religious harmony.

Consequently, in the context of this study, public space is conceptualised as a physical and aerial area accessible to all members of society, where diverse groups, often with divergent interests, congregate and interact, even if these uses do not align with the space’s original purpose. The idea of public space encompasses both public and private spaces.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY (SIT)**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) serves as a robust theoretical framework for analysing intergroup dynamics, particularly through the concepts of in-group and out-group behaviour. Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, SIT elucidates how group membership shapes individual behaviour. Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that SIT categorises

individuals based on various social identities, such as organisational affiliation, gender, age, and religious membership. Consequently, people are inclined to identify with their group (the in-group) while viewing those outside their group (the out-group) with prejudice. This dynamic fosters a division of “us” versus “them,” leading to discrimination and conflict. SIT is underpinned by three psychological processes: categorisation, social comparison, and group identification (Orebiyi, 2016). Categorisation involves grouping people, objects, or events based on perceived similarities and differences. Social comparison refers to the tendency to compare one’s group with others, often to highlight differences in prestige, power, or status. This can result in isolation from groups with differing beliefs and a stronger emphasis on promoting one’s in-group values. Group identification, the third mechanism, pertains to deriving self-esteem from group membership, often leading individuals to adopt group-specific norms and values while subsuming their identity.

Self-categorisation is pivotal in SIT, as individuals often have varying opportunities to join specific groups based on their status, personality, history, beliefs, and values. This process fosters group identity, which manifests through shared motives, expectations, norms, and behaviours (Turner and Onorato cited in Korte, 2007). Gopin (2000) elaborates on this idea, stating that individuals’ interactions often represent the broader group identity rather than personal identity. In addition to group identity, SIT explains competition and conflict between groups. Abrams and Hogg (cited in Korte, 2007) suggest that intergroup behaviour often involves struggles for status, power, and resources. This dynamic fosters bias, where individuals favour their in-group while discriminating against out-groups. Consequently, self-esteem becomes a central tenet of the theory (Korte, 2007).

SIT is relevant to this study because it aptly explains the motivations behind religious groups’ contestation for public space and the conflicts that arise. Religious groups use public spaces to promote their beliefs and identities, but such usage often leads to friction with rival groups due to religious prejudice. Oladosu and Uthman-Oladosu (2013) define religious prejudice as the refusal to accommodate others’ spiritual, social, and political preferences. This prejudice fosters intergroup conflict, as each group seeks to assert its identity as superior. Besides, the protection of an individual’s identity is regarded as a basic need whose non-satisfaction can cause conflict (Reimer, 2015). Conclusively, and in the context of this study, social identity theory helps to explain the motivations for the expression of distinct religious groups’ identities in the public space and the conflicts that ensue in consequence.

## CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS CONTESTATION FOR PUBLIC SPACE

Given that public spaces are not primarily intended for religious activities and accommodate various users, it is essential to examine why religious groups compete for these spaces, especially in a religiously diverse society. This study identifies several key motivations: performance of religious obligations, safeguard against domination by rival groups, identity promotion, and the exercise of the right to public worship.

### *Performance of Religious Obligations*

Among the Yoruba, the *Orò* deity represents an enduring traditional belief system worshipped in various ways, including annual festivals. The annual *Orò* festival, which involves processions through the town's streets by the devotees, is believed to invoke blessings, ward off evil, and promote societal peace and prosperity. Many *Orò* adherents assert that these public rituals are essential for preventing calamities and ensuring communal well-being. This implies that the festival is not designed for entertainment but is a serious metaphysical activity for the societal good. One interview participant at Iseyin noted that "the *Orò* ritual is mandatory to prevent strange occurrences such as women giving birth to animals like goats. The *Orò* festival is conducted on the streets to avert disasters and to promote the town's peace and progress." (Interview: An *Orò* Priest, Iseyin, November 15, 2014).

Similarly, a respondent at Ogbomoso asserted the imperativeness of observing the *Orò* festival in the manner it is conducted because it divinely attracts abundant peace, comfort and prosperity for the town. According to him, while parading the streets of the town, the *Orò* priest performs *Ìwúre*, which in Yoruba cosmology means abundant blessings and prevention of evil occurrences in the town. (Interview: An *Orò* devotee, Ogbomoso, May 28, 2018).

Thus, *Orò* adherents consider it compulsory to conduct the ritual festival, which involves moving from street to street and invoking benediction for the overall well-being of the people resident in the town.

*Egúngún* adherents also believe that hosting annual festivals in public spaces is a crucial ritual for ensuring the community's peace and progress. This belief is underscored by a respondent's remark:

*Egúngún* moves around the town to ward off evils and calamities while simultaneously bringing blessings. This is why the onset of the *Egúngún* festival often coincides with rainfall, symbolising the departure of evil and the arrival of good. This festival marks a

period of relief and comfort for the people of the town. (Interview: The Head of *Egúngún* of Ibadan land, Ibadan, July 6, 2015).

This highlights the profound supernatural significance of the *Egúngún* festival, far beyond mere entertainment. For its followers, public space is indispensable for its performance, as neglecting this ritual could bring dire consequences to the community. To affirm the inevitable significance of observing the *Egúngún* festival, “worshippers use the occasion to perform rituals for peace and stability of the society” (Olaoye, 2010, p. 315).

Similarly, traditional practices like *Orò* rituals also require public spaces to fulfil their spiritual purpose of expelling malevolent forces and fostering prosperity. Such insights, though, may not be empirically verifiable, but reveal a critical rationale for traditional religious groups' use of public space for their activities. To the traditional religious believers, using public spaces such as streets and markets for their activities is a compulsory religious obligation that must be performed for the benefit of the town.

In Christianity, public evangelism is deemed vital for effectively spreading the faith. Evangelism aims to persuade individuals to embrace Christianity and is often regarded as a divine obligation. Several Christian respondents affirmed that this practice is commanded by God, as one interviewee noted that “In Mark 16, Jesus charged His followers with taking the gospel into the wider world, even into public places and making disciples. Because many people never enter a church building, it’s crucial to bring His message directly to them wherever they are.” (Interview: A Christian Leader, Iseyin, January 23, 2015).

Another Christian devotee shared his opinion and experience:

Jesus Christ entrusted His followers with the task of bringing new people into His kingdom. We recognise that some individuals, deeply absorbed in their work, find it hard to attend church services. To reach these busy people, we share the gospel wherever they are. In obedience to Christ’s mandate to make disciples, I take to the streets each morning, using a megaphone to proclaim His message. (Interview: A Pastor, Ibadan, December 11, 2015).

This statement underscores how Christianity, as a mission-driven religion, prioritises expanding its membership through public engagement. Consequently, the obligation to recruit

members is a fundamental reason Christians actively seek to utilise public spaces such as stadia, recreational centers, public buses, road sides, markets, etc., to preach.

Similarly, Islamic practices also incorporate activities in public spaces, often due to religious obligations. Examples include *Jumat* (Friday) prayers, where large gatherings sometimes overflow onto public roads, and ceremonial prayers during *Eid al-Kabir* and *Eid al-Fitr*, typically held in open grounds. One respondent explained:

Friday prayers, or *Jumat*, are a weekly obligation for Muslims that must take place in a mosque. In many towns, the main mosque is the sole venue and draws large crowds seeking the spiritual benefits of attending. As more worshippers arrive, the building can become too small, causing people to spill out into surrounding areas, even onto the streets. Likewise, *Eid* prayers, which by tradition are performed outside to meet specific religious requirements, face similar challenges: city growth has eaten into open spaces, so congregants have had to find alternative locations to gather. (Interview: An Islamic Imam, Ibadan, September 3, 2015)

Thus, the necessity to fulfil religious obligation of congregational prayer often requires Muslims to utilise public spaces, even extending to roadways, when circumstances demand.

*Da'wah*, literally meaning “invitation” in Arabic, is the Islamic duty of calling others to embrace Islam or a particular understanding of it by sharing religious teachings and fostering community ties. This obligation often takes the form of personal conversations and public talks held in open venues. As one Muslim interviewee explained, “the aim is to awaken God-consciousness in the wider public, whether speaking by the roadside or elsewhere.” (An Islamic devotee, Ibadan, August 20, 2015). In this way, Muslims use shared public spaces to spread their faith and welcome new converts.

Findings from the foregoing affirm that all three religious institutions dominant in the study areas actively use public spaces to fulfil obligations they consider spiritually significant and beneficial to their adherents and the broader society. These practices stem from deeply held beliefs and traditions.

### ***Safeguarding Against Religious Domination***

Public spaces, as open social arenas, attract diverse audiences, aligning with Lawuyi's concept of "spaces of the crowd" (2012a). They provide opportunities for various groups to promote their values, beliefs, and interests. However, this competition for visibility often leads to efforts by religious groups to guard against perceived domination by rival factions. This dynamic is evidenced in behaviours such as mounting loudspeakers at worship centers (Ojo, 2019). A Christian respondent commented that "some worship centers may have only a few attendees, yet their loudspeakers create the illusion of a large congregation. This tactic ensures their presence is known, even competing with nearby religious groups for dominance" (A Christian Leader, Ibadan, August 20, 2015). Such practices extend to inter and intra-religious settings as observed and reported by a respondent at Ogbomoso, that eight different churches located in his neighborhood were fond of emitting a large volume of noise in a way that leaves no one in doubt that they were competing for dominance. He aptly describes it this way: "One disturbing thing about these churches is that they seem to be competing with each other in the way they air their worship activities through loudspeakers mounted conspicuously on their church buildings. For us, residing in the neighbourhood, we find it irritating and disturbing." (Interview: A Muslim, Ogbomoso, September 9, 2015).

This interfaith competitive drive also exists among Muslims, as evidenced in the view of a Muslim respondent. Stating reasons for religious use of public space said that it is the desire by "leaders of religious organisations to outshine themselves over other groups." (Interview: A Muslim, Ibadan, October, 2015). In the same vein, on inter-faith competition, a respondent from Ibadan described a street where a church broadcasts sermons through loudspeakers each morning, immediately followed by Islamic preaching from a nearby mosque. (Interview, A Christian devotee, Ibadan, November 5, 2025). These actions illustrate the competitive use of public spaces by different religious actors to assert dominance and resist subjugation by others.

### ***Pursuit of Public Awareness and Identity***

Another motivation for occupying public spaces by religious institutions is the desire to create awareness and reinforce group identity. This strongly suggests that religious organisations often utilise public arenas to establish their presence and promote recognition. Many respondents affirmed this as a crucial rationale for their clamour for public space. One Christian participant stated that "we do this so that people in the vicinity know about our church's location. This awareness helps attract new members." (Interview: A Church Leader,

Ibadan, December, 2015). The response suggests that awareness creation or identity promotion by Christians also goes with evangelism. Similarly, an Islamic cleric remarked that “public spaces are usually crowded, making them ideal for drawing people’s attention to the religion of Islam.” (Interview: An Islamic cleric, Ibadan, April 1, 2016). This opinion is tantamount to using the public space to promote Islamic religious identity. Such strategies underscore the role of public space in fostering religious identity.

For the *Egúngún* traditional religionists, their attempt to use the public space to promote their identity is often marred by hostilities from Muslims and Christians who denigrate them as infidels. This is evident from the complaint recorded from their leaders. One of them said that “Muslims and Christians don’t like the existence of *Egúngún* worship, and hence their children join the crowd that follows the masquerade to cause trouble to discredit the festival. They want the *Egúngún* worship dead by trying to disrupt our peaceful worship.” (Interview: An Egungun Priest, July 6, 2015). It can be inferred from the views expressed by the traditional religionists that, being conscious of the loathing for them by the followers of Christianity and Islam, they zealously promote their identity in the public space. This is in addition to other reasons that motivate their public appearances.

The attempt to boost public identity by the religious institutions aligns with Mitchell's (1995) concept of "space for representation," where groups utilise public arenas to assert their existence and values. Ogungbile (2013) also corroborates that religious groups compete for public spaces to establish and reinforce their identities.

### ***Constitutional Rights to Public Worship***

Many respondents cited constitutional guarantees as justification for using public spaces for religious activities. A Muslim cleric emphasised that “religious rights are enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, making public worship a legitimate practice.” (Interview: An Islamic cleric, Ibadan, April 1, 2016). Similarly, an *Orò* adherent from Iseyin stated, “*Orò* practitioners have the right to perform rituals in public without interference.” (Interview: An *Oro* adherent, Iseyin, January 23, 2015). Furthermore, the *Egúngún* followers are also conscious of their inalienable right to their choice of religion, as one of their leaders declared that “government should enlighten the general public on freedom of religion with nobody being forced to accept a religion against their will.” (Interview: An *Egungun* Priest, Ibadan, July 6, 2015). Meanwhile, section 38 (1) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) guarantees

these rights. Nonetheless, it also requires adherents to respect others' rights, a condition often overlooked during public religious activities by many religious adherents.

The study identifies several reasons for the use of public spaces by faith-based institutions categorised into divine, human, and secular factors. Divine factors include the performance of spiritual obligations rooted in faith and tradition. Human factors involve competition to outdo rival groups and enhance visibility and identity, while secular factors stem from exercising constitutional rights. Although these motivations are interwoven, identity enhancement emerges as the predominant driver. The growing intensity of public religious activities reflects efforts to assert group identity. Interestingly, some Islamic practices, such as night prayers and public sermons, mirror Christian traditions. This shift, as noted by Ogungbile (2013), is a strategic response to retain Muslim identity and counter the spread of Christian influence. According to him, “Muslims contest spaces to reinforce their religious identity while Christians agitate to remain more relevant” (Ogungbile, 2013, p. 164). In essence, religious clamour for public space is on the rise because of the desire to promote group identity and safeguard against domination by rival religious groups, which, in the process, engenders inter-group competition and conflicts.

Accordingly, the factors that drive contests for public space by religious groups in Oyo State can be situated in social identity theory. In line with the tenets of the theory, people identify as members of the three religious groups respectively because they accept and consider the values, interests, beliefs, and opinions of their chosen group as better than those of others. In addition, they imbibe the values of their respective religious groups and strive through their activities to promote and enhance the identity of the group in the public space. To a large extent, this factor is what drives all the religious groups considered in this study to use public space for their activities. This finding affirms the validity of social identity theory to explain that religious groups primarily occupy the public space for their activities to promote their identity to the public.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGIOUS CONTESTATION FOR PUBLIC SPACE**

The competitive use of public spaces by religious groups often results in two types of conflict: latent intra-religious and inter-religious disputes.

### **Latent Intra-religious conflicts**

This type of conflict refers to conflicts that occur among members of similar religious persuasions due to divergent interests without recourse to violence, which, in this study, is revealed to occur due to doctrinal differences and competition for visibility through loudspeakers and advertisements. For instance, intra-group tensions flare up over how churches claim public space with posters, banners, and billboards. It is observed that congregations frequently plaster these notices announcing upcoming events designed to draw big crowds across public and private property without restraint. The real point of conflict comes when one church's flyers and banners end up side-by-side (or even pasted over) another's, each scrambling to catch the eye of passers-by. In this way, Christian organisations end up in direct competition with one another in their bid for visibility.

Intra-religious conflict also manifests in the contentious use of loudspeakers during church worship. For instance, a respondent who identified as a Christian of the Baptist denomination criticised the noise pollution caused by a monthly Baptist church program in his neighborhood, particularly at night. He described it as "inconsiderate of the health and nighttime security of thousands of people; it is uncivil, ungodly, indeed lawless, as it violates the age-old law on public nuisance of noise pollution." (Culled from a letter written to the Nigerian Baptist Convention by an aggrieved Baptist member, Ibadan, July 14, 2014). Additionally, respondents of different denominations strongly condemn the noise generated by nearby churches during their worship sessions. For instance, a pastor complained that a Cherubim and Seraphim congregation adjacent to his Deeper Life Bible Church often worships with drums, bells, clapping, other resonant instruments, and loud shouts. These sounds frequently intrude on and upset his own congregation's services. (Interview: A pastor, Ibadan, December 11, 2015). A peculiar incident occurred in Ogbomoso, where a Christian sued a church adjacent to his residential building for noise pollution. In suit No. HOG/42/2000 at the High Court of Justice, Ogbomoso, the presiding judge ordered the church, Christ Calvary Apostolic Church, to cease using their premises as a place of worship due to the debilitating effects of the noise pollution on the health of the man and his wife.

On denominational or sect doctrinal differences, for example, NASFAT's members model many of their services on Christian practices as they typically gather on Sundays in public venues such as primary and secondary schools. Other groups, most notably the Ansarudeen Society of Nigeria reject this "asalatu" program as un-Islamic, arguing that its Christian-style format conflicts with traditional Muslim worship. This dynamic highlights NASFAT's rise as a distinctive, and somewhat controversial, movement within Nigerian Islam (Adogame, 2010; Ogungbile, 2013).

While this phenomenon is well-documented, it is less frequently connected to the contestation of public spaces, as observed that "in Nigeria, intra-religious intolerance has been a feature of our national life for some time. Various Christian denominations and various Muslim groups have been engaging in bitter arguments and disputes" (Kazaure, 1988: 2). Similarly, Olajudu (2003) noted that Africa experiences intra-religious conflicts through denominationalism, fundamentalism, and, at times, schism. Gofwen (2004) further affirmed that differing doctrinal interpretations within the same religion often spark intra-religious disputes in Nigeria.

### **Inter-religious Conflict**

In this study, inter-religious conflict refers to the strained relationships among adherents of different religious groups, characterised by insufficient cordiality, mutual suspicion, and a tendency toward violent or destructive confrontations (Ojo, 2019). A significant portion of the interview participants expressed concerns that using public spaces for religious activities could threaten inter-religious harmony, particularly in a religiously diverse society. One participant remarked that the "practice of using public spaces by religious groups is widespread, and if not checked, it could lead to crises, misunderstandings, animosity, and both physical and psychological violence among people." (Interview: A Muslim adherent, Ibadan, January 5, 2015). This statement reflects widespread concerns about how promoting religious identities in public spaces, shared resources accessible to everyone, can encroach on individual rights and generate discomfort or resentment. Many individuals value their right to personal space and feel violated when religious activities infringe upon this right, especially when conducted by groups with differing beliefs.

Religious preaching is a significant trigger for inter-religious conflict, particularly due to the provocative language often employed in sermons by adherents of the two mission-

oriented Abrahamic faiths. For example, some *Egúngún* respondents accused Islamic leaders of preaching divisive messages, referring to non-Muslims as “*kafir*” (infidels). (Interview: An *Egungun* Priest, July 6, 2015). Conversely, a Muslim participant noted that “Christian preachers often use provocative or derogatory terms for Muslims during their sermons.” (Interview: A Muslim, January 6, 2015). The issue extends beyond rhetoric to include actions that escalate tensions. A Christian apologist recounted that provocative remarks made by an Islamic preacher at a mosque in Ibadan’s Agugu district sparked intense disputes and ended up in court. (Interview: A Christian Leader, Ibadan, August 20, 2015). This case highlights how inflammatory language during public religious events can generate conflict and weaken social harmony, a dynamic Ayantayo (2018) identifies as a long-standing driver of interfaith tensions in Nigeria.

Another contentious issue is when religious events block public roads and impede people’s right to move freely. For example, in Ibadan’s Popoyemoja district, tensions flared between devotees of the *Egúngún* masquerade popularly known as Oloolu and local Muslim youths after the masquerade procession was barred from passing during a Muslim gathering. Tradition demands that Oloolu parade certain streets and must not encounter women who were part of the Islamic gathering. So the denial of passage ignited conflict. Likewise, long-running disputes in Iseyin pit *Orò* festival participants, who enforce movement restrictions, especially on women, against nearby Christian and Muslim residents. These clashes frequently spiral into violence and end up in court.

As noted earlier, when Muslims hold congregational prayers in the streets, they similarly block traffic and provoke frustration and disputes. For example, an interviewee reported that:

One afternoon, I was riding on a commercial motorcycle popularly called “Okada” through Ibadan’s Alaro district when we came upon a Muslim congregation holding prayers that completely blocked the street. My driver turned around and chose a much longer detour to get me where I was going, grumbling loudly about the wasted time, the extra fuel he’d have to burn, and venting a string of curses at the worshippers. (Interview: A Christian adherent, Ibadan, November 17, 2015).

Also, a respondent recounted an incident in Ilupeju, Ibadan, “at a place I once lived, there was a mosque, a church, and an *Egúngún* house situated close to one another. During an *Egúngún* ceremony, the road was blocked, preventing the people of other faiths from accessing their

places of worship. This led to a serious crisis that nearly resulted in the loss of lives.” (Interview: A Christian leader, Ibadan, August 15, 2025).

To further demonstrate that inter-religious polemics occur over physical locations or public spaces due to their use for religious activities, an incident that occurred in Igbo-Ora is worth mentioning. That year, Oro devotees gathered at the town market to conclude their yearly ritual when some Muslims appeared to challenge them. This led to a serious altercation, which was averted from becoming violent due to the timely intervention of the Nigerian Police Force. They were confronted for expressing their beliefs in the market, which is meant for all. If this had taken place at their convent, such a challenge could have been avoided. Consequently, the use of public spaces by the three religious groups obstructs the movement of people, infringing on their fundamental right to free movement and triggering inter-religious conflicts.

The use of public spaces by religious groups also generates noise pollution, primarily through loudspeakers during religious programs, as well as visual pollution from indiscriminate posters, billboards, and banners, which also ignite conflict, as noticed in this study. For instance, a respondent expressed frustration about Christian posters being placed in a predominantly Muslim area, stating, “recently, I saw Christian posters on the wall of our mosque and destroyed them. Similarly, someone tried to give me a Christian handbill, and I not only rejected it but also almost slapped him (Interview: An Islamic leader, Ibadan, June 10, 2015). These examples illustrate how the religious use of public spaces provokes inter-religious tensions and disrupts communal harmony.

This outcome illustrates the relevance of SIT, as evidenced by the research findings on intra- and inter-religious conflicts. The theory avers that, due to the feeling of prejudice (which in this context is a religious prejudice), members of a group have towards people outside their group, inter-group competition and conflict ensue. This is incited by the prejudice of members of each group towards non-members or *outsiders*, while demonstrating that they have better religious beliefs and practices. As seen in this study, the behaviour of members of religious groups amply demonstrates an attempt to prove that they are better and superior to others in the promotion of their different identities in the public space, thereby inciting conflict with other groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research examined why religious groups contest public space while performing their religious activities, its consequences, and implications on inter-religious harmony in the selected towns in Oyo State, Nigeria. Although the groups have justifiable reasons to appropriate public space, the action instigates both intra- and inter-religious conflicts. The nature of the conflict it generates is more latent and infrequently violent. Therefore, the phenomenon engenders negative inter-religious harmony. This outcome affects interfaith peaceful co-existence in the study areas and the entire country because of the religious heterogeneity of Nigeria. This research outcome makes it imperative for the government to enforce strict regulation on the use of public space by religious groups. However, it is advisable to investigate if the level of interreligious disharmony has exacerbated or otherwise since the time the study was conducted. In addition, more respondents can be recruited for the study to provide a broader perspective.

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