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Religion, Outgroup Threats and Peacebuilding in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Outgroup threats deeply rooted in decades of recurrent violence linked to religion have largely undermined peacebuilding efforts between Christian and Muslim Communities in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. This suggests that underlying intergroup factors remain unresolved. Anchored on Realistic Conflict Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Integrated Threat Theory, the study investigated community's perceptions of how religious factors create outgroup threats, and which locally driven peacebuilding efforts are considered as most effective. Qualitative data were gathered from 8 focus group discussions and 64 key informant interviews involving 128 Christian and Muslim residents of Jos city. The results revealed both Christians and Muslims perceived religious leadership as playing a double-edged role in shaping outgroup threats: while some religious leaders promote peace, tolerance and interfaith collaboration, others intensify threats through hate messages, inciting preachings, extremist interpretations, politization of religion and misinformation. Participants also identified 11 community-based peacebuilding approaches considered as most effective. The study concluded that addressing outgroup threats for sustainable peace in Jos requires policies that hold religious leaders accountable for their actions and utterances. The findings extend understanding of how outgroup threats are shaped between religious communities to drive intergroup conflicts and erode durable peace. Thus, it is recommended that policy-makers should enact and enforce religious guidelines where religious leaders who incite hate and violence are held accountable.

Keywords: Religion, Outgroup Threats, Peacebuilding, Integrated Threat Theory, recurrent violence.

Introduction

Peacebuilding as a critical aspect of conflict resolution is meant to address underlying causes and drivers of conflict such as outgroup threats, historical grievances, structural violence, socioeconomic inequality, political marginalisation or domination. Building an effective peace requires comprehensive approaches involving social cohesion through cooperation amongst diverse stakeholders within the context and distinction of a given community. In the Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, peacebuilding efforts have been largely

undermined by outgroup threats deeply rooted in decades of recurrent violence linked to ethnoreligious identity. This obstruction of peace by intergroup threats has led to cycles of violence, destruction of lives and property, and widening social segregations, mainly between Christian and Muslim communities in the city.

Although existing literature on Jos crises acknowledge the role of religion in influencing outgroup threats between Christians and Muslims (Dinshak, 2013; Krause, 2011; Best, 2011), there is a paucity of research that systematically investigates the community's own perceptions of how religious factors create outgroup threats, and more importantly, which locally driven peacebuilding efforts are considered as most appropriate in reducing those threats and promote sustainable peace. This study was set to bridge these gaps.

The objectives of the study are to investigate community's perceptions of how religious factors create outgroup threats, and which locally peacebuilding strategies are perceived as most effective in reducing outgroup threats and the recurrent violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. The study therefore answers the following Questions: In what ways do religious factors create outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria? What community-based peacebuilding approaches are considered as most effective in reducing outgroup threats and the recurrent violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria?

The study contributes to academic debate on group dynamics and intergroup behaviour in Jos. Through the lens of realistic conflict theory, social identity theory, and the integrated threat theory, the study extends the understanding of how outgroup threats are shaped between religious communities to drive intergroup conflicts and undermine peacebuilding in Jos and similar context. Though the findings cannot be generalized statistically, they provide in-dept understanding of the way Christians and Muslims in Jos perceive how religious factors shapes intergroup threats, and which peacebuilding interventions are considered as most workable at community level. It also provides peace stakeholders with evidence-based information that will help in creating sustainable peace programmes that address outgroup threats and the recurrent violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos.

Conceptual / Empirical Review

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding has been conceptualised as procedures aimed at preventing violent conflict from relapsing by addressing the root causes and ensuring sustaining relationship between conflicting parties (Galtung, 1969). Galtung also differentiates between negative peace (absence of violence), and positive peace (present of justice, impartiality and supportive relationships). Similarly, Boutros-Ghali (1992) framed peacebuilding as action taken to identify and support structures that solidify and strengthen peace to

prevent relapse of violence. These perspectives emphasise post-conflict rebuilding and the creation of firm establishments that sustain peace. However, Lederach (1997) frames peacebuilding as a comprehensive approach that transforms relations across all levels of society through community ownership of the peacebuilding processes, relationship building and cultural awareness.

In Jos, peacebuilding must therefore go beyond security measures (negative peace) to address the underlying threat perceptions and trust deficit (positive peace) between Christian and Muslim communities. The recurrent identity-based violence in the city over the years have created ingroup-outgroup social relationship that are characterised with suspicions, spatial and social segregations along religious leanings, and opposing narratives about indigene-settler dichotomy and survival (Best, 2011; Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2011). It means that building sustainable peace in Jos should not only be limited to military interventions, but also include religious institutions, community leaderships and individuals to collectively strategize ways of rebuilding trust and shared identity.

SIT provides a basis for analysing how religious identity in Jos intensifies social differences, ingroup favouritism, and outgroup prejudice (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to undermined peacebuilding efforts between Christian and Muslim communities. Similarly, ITT explains how perceived threats to group's resources, security, political position, identity, values or culture create intergroup prejudice, anxiety and suspicions to intensify hostility and threaten peace between Christians and Muslims in Jos. Thus, Peacebuilding in this study is conceptualised to mean undertaking constructive measures that address both physical and perceptual threats through inter-religious engagement to promote peaceful coexistence between Christian and Muslim communities. Also, peacebuilding interventions in Jos are examined in this study as approaches to reduce perceived outgroup threats, view identities beyond religion, and transform hostile relationships into helpful behaviours.

Outgroup Threats

Outgroup threats are viewed as circumstances where ingroup members perceived outgroup members as endangering their identity, values, security, resources, or political position (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The duo in their ITT, argue that realistic and symbolic threats trigger intergroup competitions and self-protective mobilization. In fact, research finding revealed that Outgroup threats are impediments to peacebuilding efforts because they create psychological barriers to reconciliation (Bar-Tal, 2000). The reason being that threat responses decrease willingness to pardon, deepen fear of betrayal, and sustain victimhood narrations that rationalise continuous antagonism (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015).

Accordingly, in contexts disposed to conflict like Jos where outgroup threats remain unresolved, peacebuilding interventions through negotiation, social contact, and formal restructurings often become counterproductive. The reason being that outgroup threats provide the mental and emotional bases for increasing conflict, as group members interpret the behaviours of the outgroup as unfriendly or discriminating (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). For instance, empirical evidence from protracted conflict contexts reveals that when outgroup threats are noticeable, they increase the tendency of violence, strengthen intergroup boundaries, and reduce readiness to involve in peaceful co-operation (Hewstone et. al., 2006). Consequently, in Jos, cycles of violence between Christians and Muslims suggest that intergroup threat dynamics remained unaddressed.

Building durable peace in Jos therefore requires approaches that directly address outgroup threats such as reducing insecurity, correcting misinformation about the outgroup, and creating conditions for positive intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) between Christian and Muslim communities. This is so, because in Jos, outgroup threats operate within religious factors to obstruct peacebuilding effort. Investigating community's perceptions of how these religion factors create outgroup threats, and which locally peacebuilding strategies are perceived as effective, are right measures that can be taken to address those threats. Accordingly, this study views outgroup threats as dangers perceived by either Christians or Muslims in Jos towards each other which are deriving from the intersection of religious factors, historical grievances and political struggle. Understanding outgroup threats in Jos provides critical lens for explaining why cycles of violence persist and what strategies can mitigate them to promote peaceful coexistence between Christian and Muslim communities.

Religion, Outgroup threats and Peacebuilding in Jos

Religion serves as key identity marker that creates intergroup boundaries (Best, 2011; Krause, 2011). Consequently, religious factors are found to impact on adherents' attitudes towards outgroups depending on whether the religious teaching promotes acceptance and tolerance, or fosters prejudice and discriminations (Lamle, 2013; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Thus, religion plays significant role in shaping outgroup threats and social cohesion (Allport, 1954).

However, the role of religion in shaping outgroup threats is a complex one. For example, while Kunst, Sam and Ulleberg (2013) find religious identity to worsen threat, especially when tied to (ideological), ethnic or national identity; Graham, Haidt and Nosek (2009) suggest religious identity can cushion against threat and promote cohesion. These mixed findings suggest that religious impact is not inherent but facilitated by factors such as leadership, political context, socio-economic conditions, negative media representation of the religious outgroups or the intersection of these dynamics. Thus, Krause (2011) suggests that religious leaders should take responsibility for dissolving the survival

threats to religious identities that have become rooted in the daily life of the residents of Jos.

In Jos, the interactions between religious factors and political struggle have been identified to undermine peacebuilding process such as social cohesion. Best (2011) reveals that religion is the most effective identity marker that have been manipulated over the years in creating social boundaries and mobilising groups around religious leanings, often with an "us versus them" mentality that leads to politization of the identities. Similarly, Krause (2011) blames religious factors for interacting with politics of indigene-settler dichotomy to intensify mutual suspicions and divisions along religious lines in Jos. It therefore means that the political elites in Jos are manipulating religion by insinuating mutual suspicions of threat and creating division between Christian and Muslim communities for political gains. Consequently, these are obstructing peacebuilding efforts in the city.

The social and spatial polarisation along religious leanings amplified by intergroup threats in Jos, are found to endanger peacebuilding efforts. For instance, in an analytical study, 'social segregation and the emergence of exclusive educational institution in Jos: implication for peace,' Dinshak (2013) establishes that the emergence of segregated settlements in Jos as a result of the recurrences crises has led to the evolution of exclusive educational institutions for Christian and Muslim communities with implication for peace. Likewise, Jise (2014) in his work 'City polarisation and implications for peace in Jos and environs,' also asserts that, the city polarisation on social landscape along identity fault lines between the two major religions has potentials for the relapse of violence, a phenomenon Krause (2011) refers to as "deadly cycle of ethno-religious conflict in Jos" Thus, Lamle (2013) strongly cautions that any peace building in Jos that does not consider integrating the people in the divided settlements pattern of the city will only produce negative peace. Peacebuilding in Jos must therefore go beyond security intervention to addressing structures that create outgroup threats between Christians and Muslim communities. Despite this body of literature, little empirical attention has been accorded to how residents of Jos themselves perceived the influence of religious factors in creating intergroup threat, and which peacebuilding approaches they deem most appropriate.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Integrated Threat Theory (ITT). RCT posits that competition over scarce resources leads to intergroup tension and conflict (Campbell, 1965). Critics of the theory however argue that, the idea that conflict arises from competition over resources does not take into consideration the complexity of social and political relations that shapes conflict (Foucault, 1978). It also fails to account for the role of social identity and power

intricacies in intergroup behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and ignores the way identity and power shape the construction of threats and interests (Booth, 1991).

Despite the limitations observed by critics, RCT identifies one of the key factors that are generating intergroup threats and the recurrent conflicts in Jos. The indigene-settler crises over political and economic interests and the farmers-herdsmen conflicts over farm or grazing land augment the credence of the theory. In addition, RCT does not only emphasizes the role of realistic threats in obstructing peace, but also stresses how peacebuilding approach through collective goals can minimize conflict (Campbell, 1965) between Christians and Muslims in Jos. However, to sufficiently understand how outgroup threats are influenced by religious factors to undermine peacebuilding efforts in Jos, it is necessary to complement the RCT with SIT and ITT.

SIT proposes that individuals derive self-esteem from group membership and distinguish the social world as "us" versus "them", emphasising that a mere perception that an individual belongs to (one of) two separate groups is enough to trigger intergroup discrimination favouring the group the person belongs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In Jos, the "us versus them" behavioural pattern of religious differences reinforces threat and exclusion (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), and undermine peacebuilding efforts between Christian and Musim communities. Although SIT is being criticised for attributing complex social problems solely to social identity process, and for failing to account for power dynamics and structural factors that can influence intergroup behaviour (Reicher, 2004), overall, it provides a valuable framework for understanding intergroup behaviour. However, it is important that its limitations are acknowledged for further theoretical exploration.

Thus, the consideration of ITT (Stephan and Stephan, 2000; 2017) which integrates both RCT and SIT. It encompasses realistic threats, symbolic threats, and intergroup anxiety. A study found symbolic threat as better predictor of hate, while realistic threat predicts aggression (Martinez, Riek, & Mania, 2022). Though Critics of threat theory accuse it for neglect of power dynamics (Sidanius & Prato, 2001) and individual differences (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), it is applauded for explaining prejudice and discrimination (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) and identifying different forms of threats (Riek, et al., 2006). While RCT explains how resource competition generates intergroup threats and conflict in Jos, SIT explains identity differences as the sources of threats and violence, and ITT broadly integrates both to explain how outgroup threats emerge from the intersection of resource competition and religious difference to undermine durable peace between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. The use of this integrated framework expands the understanding of how threat perceptions operate within religious outgroups to undermine peacebuilding between Christians and Muslims in Jos.

Methodology

- **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. The central aim is to arrive at the "essence" of an experience by suspending the researcher's preconceptions and focusing on participants' subjective meanings (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The choice of this design is justified by the nature of the research problem in relation to the objectives of this study, epistemological alignment of constructivism, and by methodological fit. Phenomenology is therefore appropriate because it allows participants' lived experiences and provides a framework for uncovering the meanings (van Manen, 2016) they attach to religion, threats, and peacebuilding in Jos.

- **Study Area**

Jos is a cosmopolitan metropolis with people of diverse religious affiliations. The city comprises of Jos town (in Jos North, LGA) and Bukuru (in Jos South, LGA). The recent population estimate of Jos metropolis is 1,120,351 (National Population Commission [NPC], December, 2023). The city owes its massive population growth to several factors such as mineral resources, commercial activities that present employment and economic prospects, numerous higher institutions of learning, and headquarters to many religious organisations. However, these factors have are stimulating intergroup competitions and threats over space, resources, governance and sociocultural influence in the city. They have also polarised the city, making it volatile to identity-based violence, particularly between the adherents of the two dominant religions.

- **Data Collection**

The study employed two qualitative instruments: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII). The choice of these two methods was guided by the phenomenological objective of capturing lived experiences of outgroup threats, and by methodological experts who advocate for methodological triangulation in sensitive, intergroup research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Eight FGD sessions were conducted: 4 groups in predominantly Christian neighbourhoods and 4 groups in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods in Jos metropolis. Each group comprised 8 participants, totalling 64 participants: 32 Christians, 32 Muslims. The number of 8 participants per group follows Krueger and Casey's (2015) recommendation of 6-10 participants for optimal interaction and manageability (p. 67). Discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview guide.

The justification for the choice of FGD is to capture how experiences are formed and reinforced in group settings (Barbour, 2007). In divided societies like Jos, experiences

and expressions of outgroup threats are produced through collective narratives, rumours, and shared memories. Christians or Muslims often recount experiences of outgroup threats collectively. FGD is also efficiency for exploratory themes. 8 groups of 8 participants each allowed exploration of diverse experiences of outgroup threats across Jos city while reaching saturation within manageable sessions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

KII was selected to complement FGD by accessing in-depth, individual perspectives from community actors with strategic knowledge of outgroup threats in Jos. Sixty-four KIIs were conducted with community leaders identified through purposive sampling: 2 traditional leaders, 2 faith-based leaders, 2 youth leaders, and 2 women leaders from each of the 8 selected metropolitan areas. The categories were chosen because they represent the main actors in either shaping or managing outgroup threats at community level (Paffenholz, 2015), and to avoid group conformity bias. In FGDs, participants may self-censor when discussing outgroup threats due to fear or group pressure, but KII provides a private space for leaders to share sensitive insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Besides, it aids in triangulation of data on outgroup threats for research credibility.

- **Sampling**

The sample size was not determined statistically but was guided by phenomenological principles of data saturation and methodological recommendations. Moustakas (1994) recommended 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological interviews to reach saturation, while Guest et al. (2006) found that saturation in qualitative interviews often occurs within the first 12 interviews, with 80% of themes emerging within 6 interviews. However, because this study involved two religions, multiple neighbourhoods, and two methods of data collection, the sample was expanded to ensure adequate representation of experiences across Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. To safeguard against sampling bias, expert validation of selected research areas, balanced recruitment of Christians and Muslims, and methodological triangulation were used as strategies through FGDs and KIIs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Key examples of questions asked include: In what ways do you think religious factors are creating outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria? What community-based peacebuilding approaches do you think are considered as most effective in reducing outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria?

- **Data Analysis**

The study employed thematic narrative analysis as the method of data analysis. This approach was chosen because it allows for the examination of both the content of participants' accounts of perceived role of religious factors in shaping outgroup threats, and the peacebuilding approaches the community members considered as effective. Data

were coded using manual coding to generate codes directly linked to the two research objectives.

Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to enhance trustworthiness. Thus, to control bias, the researchers kept a reflexive journal during fieldwork, bracketed assumptions before each FGD/KII session. After transcription, peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues at University of Jos to check interpretation. This reflexive stance ensured that findings represent participants' realities, thereby strengthening confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

- **Ethical Consideration**

This study followed Five ethical principles: rapport, consent, anonymity/confidentiality, consent form, and do no harm. Rapport was established before and during data collection to create trust and reduce suspicion in divided communities (Finlay, 2002). The researchers, with assistance from community gatekeepers, spent 5-10 minutes at the start of each FGD and KII introducing themselves, explaining their statuses as researchers, and clarifying that the study was for academic purposes only. As part of building rapport and in line with cultural practices, greetings were used. This helped participants feel safe discussing experiences of outgroup threats. The researchers verbally explained the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, right to withdraw at any time without penalty, use of audio recording, and how data would be stored. Importantly, participants were given opportunity to ask questions

Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to protect participants from possible reprisals given the sensitivity of outgroup threats (UNDP, 2012). Participants were represented by code in the transcription. For example, FGD-C-01-02 (FGD Christian community 01, Discussant 02), or KII-M-04-05 (KII-Muslim community 04, Respondent 05).

A written consent form approved by the University of Jos Office of Research Development was issued to each participant before FGD or KII sessions. The form contained details on study objectives, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and contact of the Ethics Committee of the University of Jos. Participants signed the form. No data collection began until the consent form was completed. Audio-recording of the sessions were done with the consent of the participants, and transcribed verbatim.

The "do no harm" principle guided all stages of fieldwork (Do No Harm Project, 2004). Questions were worded neutrally to avoid escalating tensions. FGDs were conducted in single-faith groups to prevent intergroup confrontation. Sessions were scheduled during daytime in safe, neutral locations like community halls, Churches and Mosques. The researchers were trained to stop interviews if participants showed signs of emotional

distress and to refer them to counselling services at Plateau Specialist Hospital if needed. No participant was forced to discuss traumatic events beyond their comfort level.

Results

1. In what ways do religious factors create outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria?

The findings revealed that Religion is perceived to play critical role in shaping outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria through the influence of religious leaders based on the following themes.

The Double-Edged Role of Religion: Negative Versus Positive Advocates.

Both Muslim and Christian respondents held that religious leaders are shaping outgroup threats by causing tension through inciting messages. However**,** the role religion play in shaping outgroup threats and social cohesion was found not to be all negative. For instance, respondent KII-M-02-06 revealed that some religious leaders were viewed as promoting peace, understanding, and tolerance, and encouraging their followers to live in harmony with people of other faiths, while some preachers are inciting violence but other are preaching messages that bring peace (paraphrased). The implication of this double-edged role of religion in shaping outgroup threats and social cohesion is that, the way some religious leaders interpret and propagate religion is inciting violence, reinforcing stereotypes, polarising society and further amplifying intergroup threat. Inversely, others are promoting peace and understanding, fostering interfaith cooperation, social cohesion, shared values and common humanity between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos.

Religious leadership influence

Both Christian and Muslim respondents agreed that religious leaders have influence over their followers which they exercise in creating intergroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. A discussant observed that:

Religious leaders are the most prominent over all in term of influence over the entire people. In my opinion, religious leaders from both the two sides are the ones to be blamed if the people are bad, since they are the ones that the people listen to and trust them the most. (FGD-M-04-04).

Similarly, a Christian respondent (KII-C-04-01) also stated that, “the religious leaders, one way or the other, have amplified these threats. Because religious leaders occupy strong influential position in the community, ... embers follow what their leaders say.” The finding suggests that, religious leaders who are exhibiting negative influence are

amplifying outgroup threats. On the other hand, those who are showing positive influence are encouraging peace and understanding towards resolving the recurrent crises and intergroup threats between the Christian and Muslim communities in Jos.

Inciting preachings and Hate Messages

Some religious leaders were described as preaching messages that are perceived as provocative and divisive, creating an "us versus them." A respondent, KII-M-04-07 stressed that, “religious preachers are in some instances spreading hate speech and false information about the religions they don’t belong,” and this is done “through provocative preachings where the other religion and its members are insulted, abused, defamed and maligned.” (FGD-M-01-01). Regarding these provocative and hate messages, respondent KII-C-03-07 cautioned that, “if one religion is inciting its members against the other religion, instigating them to go and cause trouble, there will be no peace.” This suggests that provocative preaching and hate messages by some of the religious leaders are stirring intergroup hatred, suspicion, threats and violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. It is therefore essential to regulate preachers, hold them accountable, promote interfaith dialogue and foster peaceful coexistence.

Politicization of Religion

Both Christian and Muslim respondents believe politicians are deliberately politicizing religion by manipulating religious leaders to use their influence to help them achieve political agenda, thereby creating tensions and divisions. Respondent KII-M-02-07 revealed that, “politicians use the religious factor in order to achieve their aims”. In fact, a discussant expressively lamented that “Politicians are manipulating the religious institution in order to achieve their aim. (FGD-C-03-03). The manipulation of religious identity by politicians as indicated in respondent narratives, serves to create political competition into a zero-sum conflict between religious ingroups and outgroups, thereby amplifying outgroup threats as predicted by ITT. It means, manipulation of religion for political gains is a threat that drives intergroup conflict and impede peacebuilding effort in Jos city.

Misinformation

Misinformation as a threat was revealed to come from the religious leaders of both sides who are spreading misinformation and false narratives about other faiths, fuelling fears and mistrust. For instance, respondent KII-C-04-01 reasoned that, “because of their personal and certain religious interests, some of the religious leaders are pushing, they have buried the truth and sold lies to their members.” Peddling misinformation again religious outgroups as reflected in respondent accounts, serves to increase ingroup’s self-worth, and demonise the outgroup, thereby amplifying intergroup conflict as theorised by SIT. The submission suggests misinformation spread by some religious leaders are

fuelling intergroup mistrust, discrimination, and hostility between Christians and Muslims in Jos.

Distinct Themes

Disrespect, lack of understanding, extremism, and blame game were also identified as being shaped by religious leadership through their preaching and messages. The participants were particularly concerned about intergroup disrespect through derogatory terms and languages used by religious leaders to describe people of other faiths, which they felt are creating hostile environment and threatening peaceful coexistence. For instance, respondent KII-M-02-07 states that, "there are those who are going beyond bounds by calling others with derogatory names that are not appropriate." Unfortunately, such attitudes are being praised as fearlessness. A respondent lamented, "as a religion preacher, you will mount a pulpit and be calling others derogatory names to the applaud of your followers who feel you are a courageous preacher." (KII-M-02-07). Stereotyping people of other faiths reenforces biases, outgroup threats and extremism, making it very difficult for Christians and Muslims to peacefully coexist in Jos. On the other hand, blame game implies misunderstanding and polarisations of perception with each side considering themselves as victims and the other perpetrators.

2. What community-based peacebuilding approaches are considered as most effective in reducing outgroup threats and the recurrent violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria?

The respondents identified 11 locally peacebuilding strategies perceived as effective in reducing outgroup threats and the recurrent violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria as presented on the table 1 below:

Table 1

12 Peacebuilding strategies considered as effective in mitigating outgroup threats in Jos

S/N	Themes
1.	Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration
2.	Truthful and Sincere Religious Leadership
3.	Regulation of Preachers
4.	Addressing Rumours and Misinformation
5.	Fairness, Justice & Inclusive Governance

6.	Education and Awareness
7.	Poverty Alleviation and Economic Empowerment
8.	Community Engagement and Participation
9.	Youth Engagement and Social Interaction
10.	Sports and Cultural Activities
11.	Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Source. Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 above reveal the themes derived from the Christian and Muslim respondents about peacebuilding approaches they considered as effective in reducing outgroup threats and addressing the recurrent violence in Jos.

Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration

Participants highlighted the need for interfaith dialogue and collaboration, emphasising that religious leaders must collaborate to find solution to the recurrent crises in Jos. It was, cautioned that, "if religious leaders do not agree to come together and dialogue, the conflict will not end." (KII-C-02-06). Therefore, the need for interfaith dialogue and collaboration that can promote understanding and joint problem-solving.

Truthful and sincere religious leadership

Truthful and sincere religious leadership were also pointed out as measures for durable peace in Jos. Thus, it was advised that, "religious leaders should be honest and sincere to speak only the truth" (KII-M-02-02). The finding suggests that, outgroup threats between Christians and Muslims in Jos are shaped by religious leaders through falsehood and misinformation. In effect, the insincerity of the religious leaders reflects the lives of the followers who have been the actors and victims of most crises. Hence, the need for truthful and sincere leadership to promote understanding, foster peaceful coexistence between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos.

Regulation of Preachers

In addition, regulation of preachers and vetting the contents of the messages they preached were stressed as key to reducing outgroup threats in Jos. It was suggested that "a committee should be established to vet and regulate preachers, ensuring they promote peace and do not incite hatred or violence." (KII-C-01-07).

Addressing Rumours and Misinformation

Addressing rumours and misinformation were also considered as crucial to reducing outgroup threats. A respondent (KII-C-03-07) was concerned that in Jos, people "don't care to verify (rumours), they will just start killing." It means spreading rumours, misinformation and incitement of hatred are increasing threats and violence in Jos.

Fairness, Justice and **Inclusive Governance**

Christian and Muslim respondents stressed the need for fairness and justice, and inclusive governance. While Muslims respondents viewed justice in term of inclusiveness, Christian respondents viewed it in term of accountability. For instance, KII-M-04-01 warned, "until there is fairness and justice, there will be no peace." In contrast, KII-C-02-03 stressed that "we must think of justice, and nothing but justice: once you commit an act, the law should take its course." Thus, fairness and justice in Jos should encompass inclusive governance and holding people accountable for their actions. The finding suggests that, dispensing fairness and justice in Jos by political actors and religious leaders can promote equal opportunities, reduce intergroup threats and foster durable peace between Christians and Muslims

Education and Awareness

Education and awareness were identified by the participants as vital approaches to reducing outgroup threats. Thus, respondents suggested that government should be proactive in creating awareness among the citizens to tackle the recurrences of the crises. (KII-C-03-07). Education and awareness can dispel intergroup threats, stereotypes and misconceptions, leading to tolerance and teamwork.

Poverty Alleviation and Economic Empowerment

Poverty alleviation and economic empowerment were suggested key to building lasting peace in Jos. Job creation, opportunities, and support for small business (KII-C-02-08) were emphasised as means to improve livelihood and reduce tensions, thereby promoting economic development and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Jos.

Community Engagement and Participation / Youth Engagement and Social Interaction / Sports and Cultural Activities

Community engagement and participation were underscored by both Christians and Muslims as peacebuilding measures. "I think when do things together, it also helps in reducing the threats to those vices that you think Muslims or Christians are posing." (KII-C-03-02). Also, youth engagement and social interaction through sports and cultural activities were identify as the fastest medium to reduce outgroup threats and foster social cohesion between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos. Thus, it was suggested that, "youths from both communities should be encouraged to have social interaction during

festive celebrations, share meals and exchange gifts to reducing outgroup threats." (FGD-M-01-07). It means that community engagement and participation, youth engagement and social interaction through sports and cultural activities can reduce outgroup threats and foster relationships, trust, and sustainable peace between Christians and Muslims in Jos.

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Respondents from both religions underscore the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation as peacebuilding strategies. In "the issue of war, no matter how it is, reconciliation is the end of it" (KII-M-03-06), and "if both accept their fault, the reconciliation becomes faster." (FGD-C-03-07). Therefore, "if our religious leaders and the people, they will have genuine forgiveness; and when you get the root cause of the issues, there's going to be peace." (KII-C-04-05). The implication is that, only genuine reconciliation and forgiveness can bring about healing, rebuilding relationships, and promote peaceful coexistence.

Discussion of Findings

Religion, through the influence of religious leaders was perceived to play a double-edged role in creating outgroup threats between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. This reflects the contrasting arguments among scholars: while Campbell (2010) sees religion as a force for peace and reconciliation, Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) view it as a tool for inciting violence and reinforcing stereotypes. It is also consistent with Allport (1954) who identified religion as a crucial factor in shaping outgroup threats or social cohesion. The influence of religious leaders perceived to shape outgroup threats reflects leadership style. While Some leaders are said to promote peace, understanding, and tolerance, others incite violence and reinforce stereotypes, fuelling fears, mistrust, and hostility between Christians and Muslims in Jos. Thus, the need to encourage religious leaders to preach and uphold peace.

Specific ways in which religious factors are perceived to shape outgroup threats in Jos include politization of religion, rumour and misinformation, inciting preachings and hate messages, disrespect, extremism, violence, and blame game. The politicization of religion where politicians manipulate religious institutions for personal gain aligns with Best (2011). These manipulations are undermining the trustworthiness and integrity of the religious institutions and democratic process, leading to loss of trust in the institutions and the leadership, and creating division in Jos. Thus, there is need for both religious leaders and politicians to be accountable. Addressing politicization of religion in Jos should be the focus of stakeholders.

Moreover, outgroup threats are perceived to be shaped by religious leaders through rumours and misinformation, hate and inciting messages, and the use of derogatory language in Jos. The findings support theoretical assumption that group dynamics such as

leadership can influence negative emotions and attitudes, leading to prejudice, discrimination and intergroup conflicts (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This suggests that negative representations of outgroups in public discourse can affect relationship. The study therefore, highlighted the importance of addressing rumours, misconception of other religions, and stereotypes, which are creating mistrust, hostility, and lack of collaboration between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos

Disrespect, through offensive name calling is considered hate speech, which fans the embers of extremist behaviour into violence. Religious leaders in Jos who are influencing followers to adopt a negative and intolerable attitude towards people of other faiths, are reinforcing stereotype and threats. The fact that provocative language is being used in public settings without consequences suggest a lack of accountability and culture of impunity which are impediments to peacebuilding. Thus, there is need to address this negative trend through encouraging empathy, respectful language and dialogue. Also, religious leaders need to promote culture of responsibility and respect, and to be hold accountable for their utterances.

Extremism and blame game are threats perceived to be shaped by religious leaders. These distinct threats fuel hatred, radicalization, and violence between Christians and Muslims in Jos. This is consistent with existing research that identified such factors as undermining efforts to promote peace, love, and mutual understanding (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). These highlight the way in which religion is being manipulated to radicalise individual, create fear and mistrust, undermining the efforts to counter extremist narrative with alternative messages that promote peace. The blame game suggests that implies that perceptions are polarised with each side seeing themselves as victims and the other as perpetrators. Consequently, the blame game is only escalating the tension and creating cycle of retaliations. Therefore, to find a common ground towards resolution, and peace, it is important to promote empathy, understanding, and foster culture of accountability.

The findings of this study highlighted several community-based peacebuilding strategies considered as effective in mitigate outgroup in Jos. these include: interfaith dialogue, truthful and sincere leadership, regulation of preachers, addressing rumours and misinformation. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which suggests that interfaith dialogue and cooperation can reduce bias and promote social cohesion (Hunsberger and Jackson, 2005). Addressing rumours and misinformation through interfaith dialogue can be particularly reduce outgroup threats in Jos. Through interreligious collaboration, hate and inciting message can be reduced drastically. However, this can be more effective if government can come with policies that regulate preachers, vet the contents of their messages, and hold the accountable for their utterances.

Poverty alleviation and economic empowerment were also identified as important peacebuilding strategies. Accordingly, fairness, justice and inclusive governance were considered as ways through which poverty alleviation and economic empowerment can be achieved in Jos. This is consistent with Galtung (1969) suggestion that peacebuilding should address the root causes of conflict such as social and economic inequalities, and ensure sustainable relationship between conflicting parties. Addressing social and economic disparities in Jos can reduce intergroup tension and restoring friendly relationship between Christians and Muslims.

Community engagement, participation, social interaction, forgiveness, and reconciliation were also identified as key peacebuilding measures. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which highlights the importance of socialisation, community engagement, and intergroup contact in reducing outgroup stereotypes and intergroup of threats (Allport, 1954). It also emphasises the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation and effective measures for healing and rebuilding relationships between Christian and Muslim.

However, despite these numerous peacebuilding strategies being suggested by the respondents, Jos continues to experience recurrent violence. The question is why have these strategies not working, given the relapses of the conflicts? Although the respondent suggest they would, but they clearly have not prevented the recurrence. Thus, future studies should consider investigating the effectiveness of some of these peacebuilding approaches that have been in use over the time.

The study extends the ITT (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) by showing that in the Jos context, symbolic threats, specifically threats to religious identity are not only perceived but are actively constructed and amplified by religious leaders, pointing to the need of more nuanced understanding of threat generation. It therefore extends the understanding of how outgroup threats are shaped between religious communities to drive intergroup conflicts and erode sustainable peace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, building sustainable peace in Jos which has experienced decades of recurrent violence linked to religion, requires insight on the community's perceptions of how religious factors create outgroup threats, and which locally-based peacebuilding strategies are considered as most effective. Religion, through the influence of religious leadership was perceived to shape outgroup threats in Jos. While some religious leaders were perceived inciting violence, reinforcing stereotypes, polarising society and further entrenching divisions through inciting preachings, hate messages, politicization of religion, misinformation, disrespect, extremism and staging in blame game, others were said to be promoting peace and understanding, fostering interfaith cooperation and social

cohesion. According, several locally-based peacebuilding strategies were identified as effective in mitigating outgroup threats in Jos. Thus, addressing outgroup threats requires multidimensional approach.

Recommendations

1. Policy-makers should enact and enforce religious guidelines where religious leaders who incite hate and violence are held accountable and prosecuted to serve as deterrence to others.

2. Religious institutions such as Plateau State Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama'atul Nasir Islam (JNI) should establish Joint Ethics Committees (JEC) that will adopt internal disciplinary mechanisms. The committee should review complaints and enforce disciplinary action against religious leaders who politicise the institution, spread misinformation, hate messages or incite violence.

3. Community leaders and Civil Society Organisations should initiate and support community-led joint security and development projects that require the participation of both Christian and Muslim youths: joint night patrols, clean-up campaigns, borehole construction, or market security committees. This will help in tackling rumours and misinformation.

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