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THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PROMOTING PEACE BETWEEN INDIGENES AND SETTLERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Indigene–settler conflicts remain a recurring source of instability in Nigeria, often driven by disputes over land ownership, political representation, economic opportunities, and identity claims. These tensions have contributed to cycles of violence, displacement, and weakened social cohesion across several communities. This study examines the role of religious leaders in promoting peace between indigenes and settlers in Nigeria. The objectives are to analyse the causes of indigene–settler conflicts, assess the peacebuilding contributions of religious leaders, and examine the challenges affecting their effectiveness. A qualitative research design was adopted, relying on secondary data drawn from scholarly journals, books, policy reports, and documented case studies of conflict interventions in Nigeria. Data were analysed through thematic content analysis. Findings reveal that religious leaders contribute significantly to peacebuilding through mediation, interfaith dialogue, moral education, reconciliation processes, and grassroots mobilisation. However, their effectiveness is constrained by the politicisation of religion, inadequate institutional support, and the structural nature of indigene–settler disputes. The study is significant for policymakers, religious institutions, and peace practitioners in strengthening collaborative peace frameworks. It recommends enhanced interfaith institutions, capacity building for religious leaders, inclusive governance, and integrated peace education programmes. The study concludes that religious leadership, when properly supported and coordinated with state and civil society actors, remains vital for sustainable peace and national unity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Indigene–settler conflict, religious leaders, peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

Peaceful coexistence remains one of the most essential conditions for sustainable development, social stability, and national integration in every plural society. Across the world, societies

characterised by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity continue to grapple with the challenge of maintaining harmonious relationships among groups with competing identities and interests. Where mechanisms for dialogue, justice, and inclusion are weak, disagreements over identity, political representation, land ownership, and access to economic opportunities often degenerate into protracted communal conflicts. African countries have not been immune to these realities, as identity-based conflicts continue to threaten national cohesion and undermine development efforts. Within this context, peacebuilding has increasingly attracted scholarly and policy attention as a multidimensional process that seeks not only to end violence but also to restore trust, strengthen social relationships, and address the structural conditions that sustain conflict. Nigeria presents one of the most compelling examples of this challenge because its remarkable cultural and religious diversity has, at different times, functioned both as a valuable national asset and as a source of recurring social tension.

Nigeria comprises more than 250 ethnic groups, numerous indigenous languages, and diverse religious traditions, with the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo constituting the three largest ethnic nationalities alongside many minority communities. Although this diversity enriches the country's social and cultural life, it has also produced persistent disputes surrounding citizenship, identity, political participation, and ownership of communal resources. These tensions are most evident in the long-standing indigene–settler conflict, where communities recognised as indigenous inhabitants often enjoy preferential access to political offices, employment opportunities, educational benefits, and land rights, while groups regarded as settlers frequently encounter varying degrees of exclusion and discrimination. Competition over these rights has generated deep resentment, weakened intergroup trust, and contributed to repeated outbreaks of violence in several parts of the country, particularly in Plateau, Kaduna, Benue, and Nasarawa States (Gambo et al., 2025). Ethnic identity frequently intersects with religious affiliation and political interests, allowing local disputes over land or political representation to assume broader ethno-religious dimensions. Such conflicts have resulted in widespread loss of lives, destruction of property, forced displacement, and enduring psychological trauma for affected communities.

Amid these realities, religion continues to occupy a prominent position within Nigerian society, shaping moral values, social behaviour, and community relationships. Churches, mosques, and traditional religious institutions extend well beyond their spiritual functions, serving as influential centres for community mobilisation, social support, and moral formation. Consequently, pastors, priests, imams, and traditional religious leaders command considerable public confidence and possess significant capacity to influence attitudes and behaviour across diverse communities. Their responsibilities frequently extend into mediation, reconciliation, advocacy for justice, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. Numerous faith-based organisations and interfaith initiatives have demonstrated that religious leaders can reduce communal hostility through dialogue, confidence-building, humanitarian interventions, and reconciliation programmes that encourage forgiveness, mutual respect, and social healing (Samuel, 2023). Their consistent engagement at the grassroots enables them to reach communities that formal governmental institutions often struggle to access, making them valuable actors in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Nevertheless, their interventions are not without constraints. Political manipulation of religious identities, entrenched ethnic loyalties, limited institutional support, and unresolved historical grievances often reduce the effectiveness of religious peace initiatives and complicate their neutrality during communal crises.

Existing scholarship has examined religion and peacebuilding in Nigeria, while other studies have explored ethno-religious conflicts, interfaith dialogue, and community reconciliation. Considerable attention has also been devoted to farmer–herder conflicts, religious extremism, and general conflict management. Comparatively fewer studies have concentrated specifically on the contribution of religious leaders to promoting peaceful coexistence between indigenes and settlers, despite the persistence of such conflicts across several Nigerian states. Most available studies also examine isolated conflicts or particular geographical locations, offering limited analysis of the broader peacebuilding functions performed by religious leaders within the indigene–settler context. This creates a practical gap in understanding how religious leadership can contribute more effectively to mediation, reconciliation, and sustained community dialogue across diverse conflict settings. The present study addresses this gap through a focused examination of the roles, contributions, and challenges of religious leaders in promoting peace between indigenes and settlers in Nigeria. Greater understanding of these dynamics can provide useful insights for religious institutions, policymakers, peace practitioners, and civil society organisations seeking durable approaches to conflict transformation and social cohesion in an increasingly plural Nigerian society.

Conceptual Clarification

Indigene–Settler Conflict: Indigene–settler conflict refers to disputes that arise between communities regarded as the original inhabitants of a particular locality and those perceived as migrants or later arrivals. Such conflicts are commonly rooted in competing claims over land ownership, political representation, citizenship rights, economic opportunities, and access to public resources. Although migration and settlement are natural features of human societies, tensions emerge when legal, political, or customary arrangements confer unequal rights and privileges on one group while excluding another. According to Jegede (2016), these conflicts are often sustained by historical grievances, political manipulation, and struggles over identity, particularly where state institutions fail to guarantee equal citizenship and social justice. Rather than remaining isolated disagreements, indigene–settler disputes frequently evolve into broader communal crises that threaten social stability and peaceful coexistence.

Within the Nigerian context, the indigene–settler question has become one of the most enduring sources of communal conflict. Many communities distinguish between those considered indigenous to an area and those classified as settlers, even when the latter have lived in the locality for several generations. Such distinctions often determine eligibility for political appointments, traditional leadership positions, land ownership, public employment, educational opportunities, and other socio-economic benefits. Feelings of exclusion and perceived injustice have therefore generated mistrust between communities, while political actors have, at different times, exploited these divisions for electoral and sectional interests. Ethnic and religious identities frequently reinforce these tensions, increasing the likelihood that local disputes will escalate into violent confrontations. Within the context of this study, indigene–settler conflict refers to persistent disputes arising from contested identity, unequal access to rights and resources, and competing claims to belonging, all of which undermine peaceful coexistence among communities in Nigeria.

Peacebuilding: Peacebuilding refers to a sustained process of preventing violent conflict, addressing its underlying causes, restoring damaged relationships, and creating social conditions

that support lasting peace. The concept extends beyond the cessation of violence and encompasses initiatives that promote reconciliation, dialogue, mediation, trust-building, justice, and inclusive community development. Haruna et al. (2024) observe that effective peacebuilding addresses both the immediate consequences of conflict and the structural factors that perpetuate hostility, thereby creating opportunities for long-term social transformation rather than temporary conflict management. Peacebuilding therefore seeks to strengthen institutions and relationships capable of resolving future disputes through peaceful means.

Religious institutions occupy an important position within peacebuilding efforts because they possess extensive grassroots networks, moral legitimacy, and sustained engagement with local communities. Religious leaders frequently encourage forgiveness, tolerance, reconciliation, and mutual respect through sermons, counselling, interfaith dialogue, and community outreach programmes. Their moral authority often enables them to facilitate mediation between conflicting groups, rebuild trust after violence, and mobilise communities towards reconciliation and social harmony. Within the framework of this study, peacebuilding refers to the collective efforts undertaken by religious leaders and faith communities to reduce hostility, facilitate dialogue, promote reconciliation, and strengthen peaceful coexistence between indigenes and settlers in Nigeria.

The Influence of Religion in Nigerian Society

Religion occupies a central position in Nigerian society and continues to shape individual behaviour, communal relationships, public morality, and political discourse. Christianity and Islam constitute the two dominant religious traditions, while African Indigenous Religion remains influential in many communities through cultural practices and traditional institutions. Unlike many societies where religion is largely confined to the private sphere, religious belief in Nigeria permeates virtually every aspect of public life, including education, healthcare, politics, social welfare, and community governance. Consequently, religious leaders command considerable respect and moral legitimacy, often exercising influence that extends beyond spiritual matters into social and political affairs. Many Nigerians consult pastors, priests, imams, and traditional religious leaders for guidance on family disputes, community disagreements, economic decisions, and civic responsibilities because they are widely regarded as trustworthy custodians of moral values (Mercy Corps, 2017). This enduring confidence places religious institutions in a strategic position to shape public attitudes and encourage peaceful coexistence.

The influence of religious leaders becomes even more evident during periods of communal tension and violent conflict. Across different parts of Nigeria, faith leaders have served as mediators, advocates for reconciliation, and promoters of dialogue between conflicting communities. A notable example is the work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna State, where Christian and Muslim leaders have collaborated to reduce religious violence through community dialogue, early warning mechanisms, youth engagement, and confidence-building initiatives. Similar interventions have been undertaken through the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which brings together senior Christian and Muslim leaders to address national issues affecting interfaith relations and peaceful coexistence. Following repeated ethno-religious crises in Jos, Plateau State, religious organisations and local clergy facilitated reconciliation meetings, trauma-healing programmes, and peace campaigns aimed at restoring trust among divided communities. Such initiatives demonstrate that religious authority, when

exercised responsibly, can moderate hostility, discourage retaliatory violence, and create opportunities for constructive engagement between conflicting groups (Samuel, 2023).

Scholarly literature consistently recognises that religious leaders possess considerable capacity to influence social attitudes because they maintain close and continuous contact with local communities. Their weekly sermons, counselling sessions, educational programmes, and humanitarian activities provide regular opportunities to shape public perceptions and reinforce values such as forgiveness, justice, tolerance, and mutual respect. Community members frequently rely on religious leaders for advice during periods of uncertainty, making them influential intermediaries in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes (Mercy Corps, 2017). Nevertheless, religion presents a complex paradox within the Nigerian context. The same institutions capable of fostering reconciliation have, on occasion, been drawn into political competition, ethnic mobilisation, and sectarian divisions. Political elites sometimes exploit religious identities to advance partisan interests, while a few religious actors have adopted positions that reinforce communal polarisation rather than encourage dialogue. Such realities suggest that the peacebuilding potential of religion depends not merely on religious belief itself but on the manner in which religious leadership is exercised within specific social and political contexts.

Existing studies have examined the relationship between religion and conflict management in Nigeria, with considerable attention devoted to interfaith dialogue, farmer–herder conflicts, violent extremism, and general peacebuilding initiatives. Other scholars have documented the contributions of organisations such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre and NIREC to conflict prevention and reconciliation. Despite these valuable contributions, comparatively little attention has been given to the specific role of religious leaders in addressing indigene–settler conflicts, where disputes are simultaneously shaped by ethnicity, citizenship, land ownership, political exclusion, and religious identity. Scholars have equally argued that persistent inequality in the distribution of public resources and opportunities fuels social discontent and weakens national cohesion. Fairness and equitable access to the commonwealth therefore remain indispensable conditions for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria (Terungwa & Ukpe, 2018). Many previous studies also focus on particular regions or isolated conflicts, limiting broader understanding of how religious leadership functions across different indigene–settler contexts in Nigeria. This practical gap justifies the present study, which examines how religious leaders contribute to mediation, reconciliation, community dialogue, and peaceful coexistence between indigenes and settlers while also assessing the constraints that influence the effectiveness of their interventions.

Roles of Religious Leaders in Promoting Peace

Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Religious leaders in Nigeria occupy a unique moral position that enables them to intervene in communal disputes where state institutions often struggle to gain trust. Their authority is largely symbolic rather than coercive, yet it carries significant weight in shaping community decisions during crises. In indigene–settler tensions, they are frequently invited to mediate because they are perceived as impartial actors with longstanding relationships across ethnic divides. Abdullahi and Bashir (2024) observe that religious mediators are often trusted because their legitimacy is derived from moral credibility rather than political affiliation.

Practical evidence from Nigeria demonstrates this mediating role in several conflict-prone regions. In Kaduna State, the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), founded by Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, has played a critical role in resolving Christian–Muslim violence through structured dialogue and reconciliation processes. Similar interventions have occurred in Plateau State, where religious leaders participated in peace committees established after recurrent Jos crises to reduce retaliatory attacks between communities. Mercy Corps (2017) also reports that in farmer–herder conflict zones in Plateau State, religious leaders influenced decisions on land disputes and discouraged violent retaliation among affected communities.

Mediation by religious leaders often works through moral persuasion, reframing conflict narratives in ethical and spiritual terms that emphasise shared humanity. Instead of focusing solely on legal or political solutions, they encourage dialogue that allows disputing groups to acknowledge grievances and seek restorative outcomes. This approach has proven effective in reducing immediate tensions, particularly in rural communities where formal justice systems are weak or inaccessible.

Despite these contributions, mediation efforts face structural limitations. In some cases, religious leaders are embedded within the same ethnic or political networks that fuel conflict, raising concerns about neutrality. Additionally, lack of formal training in conflict resolution sometimes limits their effectiveness in complex disputes involving land tenure, political exclusion, and historical grievances. These limitations indicate that religious mediation is impactful but insufficient without institutional support and professional capacity-building frameworks.

Interfaith Dialogue and Mutual Understanding

Interfaith dialogue has become one of the most widely used peacebuilding strategies in Nigeria's multi-religious environment. Religious leaders play a central role in initiating and sustaining such engagements, particularly in areas where religious identity overlaps with ethnic and political tensions. These dialogues aim to reduce prejudice, correct misinformation, and build trust between communities that have experienced cycles of violence.

A well-documented example is the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which brings together senior Christian and Muslim leaders at national level to address issues affecting peaceful coexistence. At the grassroots, the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna has facilitated sustained dialogue between youths from opposing religious groups, helping to reduce retaliatory violence and improve cooperation in local development initiatives. Oyebanji and Oyunwola (2023) note that such interfaith engagements have contributed to rebuilding trust in communities previously divided by ethno-religious crises. Empirical findings further support the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue. Research conducted in northern Nigeria indicates that structured interfaith programmes significantly reduce hostility by encouraging participants to recognise shared values across religious traditions (Mercy Corps, 2017). In Kano, interfaith engagement following insurgency-related tensions contributed to the emergence of peace agreements that improved coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities (Iweze, 2022).

However, interfaith dialogue often suffers from limited grassroots penetration. Many initiatives remain elite-driven, involving senior religious figures without sufficiently engaging women, youths, and rural populations who are often most affected by violence. Funding constraints and

inconsistent institutional support also reduce the sustainability of these programmes, thereby limiting their long-term impact on deeply entrenched conflicts.

Moral Education and Peace Advocacy

Religious leaders exert continuous influence through moral education delivered in sermons, religious teachings, and public outreach programmes. These platforms provide opportunities to reinforce values such as forgiveness, justice, tolerance, and compassion, which are central to peaceful coexistence. Religious teachings encourage honesty, forgiveness, justice, self-restraint, and respect for human dignity. Such moral values influence individual conduct and strengthen peaceful interpersonal relationships. According to Ukpe and Oko (2026), religion possesses considerable capacity to regulate social behaviour and promote values that support national development, making religious leaders strategic actors in preventing violence and cultivating a culture of peace. In many Nigerian communities, weekly religious gatherings remain one of the most powerful channels for shaping social attitudes and behavioural norms.

During periods of indigene–settler conflict, moral messaging often serves as a stabilising force. Clerics in Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa States have used sermons to discourage reprisals and encourage restraint following outbreaks of communal violence. Mercy Corps (2017) reports that religious leaders in conflict-prone areas significantly influence behavioural choices, with many community members indicating they would reconsider violent actions if advised against them by their spiritual leaders.

Peace advocacy extends beyond religious sermons to include radio broadcasts, community sensitisation programmes, and collaboration with civil society organisations. In Kaduna State, faith leaders have partnered with peace organisations to deliver radio messages discouraging hate speech and promoting intergroup tolerance. Such initiatives help counteract inflammatory rhetoric that often circulates during election periods or communal disputes.

Despite these efforts, moral advocacy faces challenges in contexts where religious messaging is politicised. Competing narratives from political actors and extremist groups sometimes undermine peace messages, particularly where communities are divided along ethnic or religious lines. This creates a gap between moral instruction and behavioural compliance, revealing the need for coordinated peace communication strategies across institutions.

Community Reconciliation and Healing

Religious leaders play an essential role in post-conflict recovery by facilitating reconciliation and emotional healing among affected populations. Violent conflicts often leave deep psychological scars, fractured relationships, and weakened trust within communities. Religious institutions provide culturally acceptable spaces where victims and perpetrators can engage in dialogue and begin processes of restoration. In Jos, Plateau State, religious leaders have been involved in reconciliation initiatives following cycles of ethno-religious violence. These initiatives include peace meetings, forgiveness ceremonies, and trauma counselling sessions designed to rebuild trust between divided communities. Okoli and Muonwe (2025) note that religious frameworks of forgiveness and restitution often align with local cultural practices, making reconciliation processes more socially acceptable. Beyond dialogue, religious institutions also provide psychosocial support services to victims of violence. Churches and mosques frequently organise counselling sessions for displaced persons and families affected by communal clashes. These

interventions contribute to emotional healing and gradual reintegration of affected individuals into their communities.

Nevertheless, reconciliation efforts are often constrained by unresolved structural inequalities. Where underlying issues such as land disputes, political exclusion, and economic marginalisation remain unaddressed, reconciliation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. This underscores the need for integration between religious reconciliation efforts and broader governance reforms.

Grassroots Mobilisation for Peace

Religious leaders possess extensive grassroots networks that make them highly effective in mobilising communities for peacebuilding initiatives. Through regular worship services, religious gatherings, and community organisations, they reach large populations across urban and rural settings. This widespread access enables rapid dissemination of peace messages during periods of tension. In Nigeria, faith-based organisations have organised peace rallies, youth empowerment programmes, and intergroup dialogue sessions aimed at strengthening social cohesion. The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) has trained thousands of community members in conflict resolution skills across Kaduna, Plateau, and Kano States, thereby extending peacebuilding capacity beyond formal institutions (IMC, 2019).

Youth engagement remains a central component of grassroots mobilisation. Religious leaders often establish youth groups that promote civic responsibility, non-violence, and interfaith cooperation. These programmes are particularly important in areas where unemployment and social exclusion increase vulnerability to violence. However, grassroots peace initiatives are often fragmented and lack coordination with governmental peace structures. Many programmes operate independently without integration into national peacebuilding frameworks, leading to duplication of efforts and inconsistent impact. Strengthening institutional collaboration between religious organisations, government agencies, and civil society remains essential for sustainable peace outcomes.

Challenges Facing Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding

Religious leaders in Nigeria have continued to play visible roles in mediating conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence between indigenes and settlers. However, their peacebuilding efforts are often constrained by structural, political, and socio-economic realities that limit both their neutrality and effectiveness. These challenges do not necessarily negate their influence but they shape the extent to which religious interventions can produce sustainable peace in deeply divided communities. One of the most persistent challenges is the politicisation of religion. In many parts of Nigeria, political actors strategically mobilise religious identities to consolidate power, influence electoral outcomes, or legitimise exclusionary policies. During periods of heightened political competition, religious sentiments are sometimes amplified in ways that deepen ethnic and communal divisions. This environment places religious leaders in difficult positions, especially when they are expected to maintain neutrality while their congregations or ethnic constituencies hold strong partisan expectations. In states such as Kaduna and Plateau, episodes of indigene–settler violence have often been accompanied by narratives that frame conflicts in religious terms, even when underlying causes are linked to land, political representation, or economic competition (Samuel, 2023). Such politicisation reduces the

credibility of religious leaders as neutral mediators and complicates their ability to speak universally accepted messages of peace.

Another major constraint is the limited institutional and financial support available for religious peacebuilding initiatives. Although religious institutions possess strong grassroots reach, many peace interventions are carried out informally without structured funding, professional training, or sustained institutional partnerships. Mercy Corps (2017) observes that in several conflict-affected communities in Nigeria, religious leaders often rely on personal resources to organise dialogue sessions, peace meetings, and community outreach programmes. This lack of formal support weakens the continuity of peace initiatives and limits their scalability beyond immediate local settings. In addition, insufficient coordination between religious organisations and government agencies often results in fragmented peacebuilding efforts, where activities overlap or fail to address long-term structural drivers of conflict.

A further challenge lies in the complexity of the conflicts themselves, which extend beyond the moral or spiritual domain. Indigene–settler tensions in Nigeria are deeply rooted in issues of land ownership, political exclusion, economic inequality, and historical grievances. These structural drivers cannot be resolved through moral persuasion or religious counselling alone. For instance, disputes over land tenure in parts of Plateau and Benue States are closely linked to administrative policies and resource allocation systems that require legal and governmental intervention. While religious leaders can encourage restraint and reconciliation, they often lack the institutional authority to address these underlying socio-political and economic factors (Okoli & Muonwe, 2025). The inability of political institutions to provide inclusive governance often places unrealistic expectations on religious leaders to resolve conflicts whose underlying causes are fundamentally political and administrative. This illustrates the broader leadership deficit identified by Ukpe and Tsendzuul (2018), who argue that sustainable development in Nigeria requires ethical and accountable leadership across all sectors. This limitation reveals a gap between moral peacebuilding efforts and structural conflict transformation.

Moreover, the expectation placed on religious leaders to serve as primary peace actors sometimes overlooks the need for broader multi-sectoral engagement. Sustainable peace requires collaboration between religious institutions, state authorities, civil society organisations, and traditional governance structures. Where such collaboration is weak, religious interventions risk becoming short-term responses rather than durable solutions. This gap underscores the need to reposition religious peacebuilding within a wider institutional framework that integrates governance reform, economic inclusion, and justice-oriented policies alongside moral and spiritual guidance.

Recommendations

1. Sustainable peace between indigenes and settlers in Nigeria requires stronger and more functional interfaith structures that go beyond symbolic dialogue. Government agencies, in collaboration with civil society organisations and international development partners, should formally establish and fund interfaith councils at federal, state, and local government levels. These councils should include Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious leaders with clearly defined roles in conflict prevention, mediation, and peace education. Regular quarterly meetings should be institutionalised to ensure continuity rather than ad hoc engagement during crises.

2. Interfaith institutions should also be equipped with early warning and early response mechanisms that allow them to detect emerging tensions in communities. This can be achieved through community reporting systems, trained volunteers, and partnerships with local leaders who can provide timely information on potential flashpoints. In conflict-prone areas such as Plateau, Kaduna, Benue, and Nasarawa States, such systems can help prevent escalation by enabling rapid dialogue before violence occurs. Beyond crisis response, interfaith bodies should be mandated to organise structured peace campaigns, school outreach programmes, and community reconciliation forums. These activities should be jointly led by religious leaders from different faiths to reinforce messages of unity and shared responsibility. When religious leaders publicly collaborate, it reduces suspicion among followers and strengthens the credibility of peace messaging at the grassroots level.

3. Religious leaders require continuous professional development to enhance their effectiveness in peacebuilding roles. Government institutions, theological seminaries, and peace research centres should design structured training programmes focused on conflict analysis, mediation techniques, negotiation skills, trauma counselling, and reconciliation strategies. These programmes should lead to recognised certificates that formalise their competence in peace work. Training should be practical and context-specific, using case studies from Nigerian conflicts such as the Jos crises, farmer–herder clashes in Benue, and intercommunal disputes in Kaduna. Simulation exercises and community-based practicums should be included to ensure that religious leaders can apply theoretical knowledge in real-world situations. Special attention should also be given to digital literacy, enabling religious leaders to counter misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms. Capacity-building efforts should also include training on neutrality and ethical leadership in conflict environments. This is necessary because religious leaders sometimes face pressure from ethnic or political groups. Strengthening their ability to maintain impartiality will improve trust and increase their acceptance as mediators in indigene–settler disputes.

4. Government at all levels should institutionalise partnerships with religious leaders as part of national and local peace architecture. This can be achieved through the establishment of formal advisory councils on peace and security that include selected religious leaders alongside traditional rulers and civil society representatives. Such councils should be integrated into existing security and conflict management frameworks to ensure coordinated responses to emerging tensions. Religious leaders should be actively involved in community policing initiatives, peace education campaigns, and reconciliation programmes supported by government agencies. Their access to grassroots populations makes them effective channels for disseminating non-violence messages and countering inflammatory rhetoric during crises. Governments should also provide logistical and financial support for faith-based peace initiatives, particularly in high-risk communities. In addition, policymakers should consult religious leaders during the formulation of laws and policies affecting land administration, citizenship rights, and local governance structures. This inclusive approach ensures that policies are socially acceptable and reduces resistance from communities that may otherwise perceive government interventions as biased or externally imposed.

5. Reducing indigene–settler conflicts requires deliberate reforms that promote equal citizenship rights and reduce structural discrimination. Governments should review policies that restrict access to political participation, employment, and land ownership based on indigeneity. Legal and administrative frameworks should be harmonised to ensure that all residents enjoy equal rights regardless of ethnic origin or length of residence. Local government structures should be redesigned to ensure fair representation of both indigenous and settler communities

in decision-making processes. This may include rotational leadership arrangements, inclusive advisory boards, and participatory budgeting systems that allow different groups to contribute to local development priorities. Such measures reduce perceptions of exclusion, which often fuel resentment and conflict. Religious leaders should play an advocacy role in promoting fairness and equity within governance systems. Through sermons, public engagement, and civic education, they can reinforce ethical principles of justice and equality. Their moral voice can help pressure political actors to adopt inclusive policies that support long-term social cohesion.

6. Religious institutions should adopt structured peace education programmes that are consistently delivered at grassroots level. These programmes should be embedded in weekly sermons, religious education curricula, youth fellowships, and women's groups. Messages should focus on tolerance, non-violence, respect for diversity, and the dangers of ethnic or religious hatred. Targeted peace education for young people is particularly important, given their vulnerability to mobilisation during communal conflicts. Religious organisations should establish youth peace clubs that promote leadership development, intergroup dialogue, and community service activities. These initiatives can reduce susceptibility to manipulation by political or extremist actors. Religious institutions should also collaborate with schools, local media, and community organisations to expand the reach of peace messaging. Radio programmes, community theatre, and social media campaigns can be used to reinforce positive narratives of coexistence. Sustained implementation of these strategies can gradually reshape attitudes and reduce hostility between indigenes and settlers, particularly in conflict-prone communities.

Conclusion

The indigene–settler conflict remains a persistent threat to peace, social cohesion, and national integration in Nigeria. Rooted in contested claims over land ownership, political representation, economic opportunities, and cultural identity, these conflicts have repeatedly resulted in violent confrontations, population displacement, and significant loss of lives and property. Within this fragile context, religious leaders occupy a strategic position due to their moral authority, deep community presence, and ability to shape values and behavioural norms across diverse populations. Their contributions through mediation, interfaith dialogue, moral instruction, reconciliation efforts, and grassroots mobilisation demonstrate that religious leadership can serve as a stabilising force in divided communities. These interventions help to reduce tensions, rebuild trust, and promote coexistence among conflicting groups. However, the effectiveness of such efforts is largely dependent on sustained collaboration between religious institutions, government structures, and civil society organisations. Without such coordinated engagement, the peacebuilding potential of religious leaders risks being fragmented and underutilised. At the same time, religious peacebuilding cannot function in isolation from broader structural reforms. Enduring solutions to indigene–settler tensions require policy measures that address inequality in land distribution, political exclusion, limited access to social services, and unfair representation in governance structures. When religious initiatives are integrated with institutional reforms and inclusive governance practices, they contribute more effectively to long-term stability. Strengthening the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding offers a viable pathway toward sustainable peace in Nigeria. Their engagement not only helps to manage immediate conflicts but also fosters long-term social cohesion and mutual respect among diverse groups. When combined with effective state policies and civic participation, religious leadership becomes a critical pillar for enduring peace, stability, and national unity in Nigeria.

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