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Religious Othering in Nigeria's Electoral Discourse: Towards a Critical Religious Tolerance

Abstract

Religion is a main characteristic of Nigerian identity and influences the algorithm of its public life. The study explores online religious othering in Nigeria's electoral discourse. The study utilises a critical discourse analytic approach and examines a dataset of over 14,000 Facebook comments from Nigerians from different religious groups. The analysis revealed that religious othering in the electoral discourse was indexed using three major strategies, namely: demonisation, ingroup ostracisation, and stereotyping. The study demonstrates, among others, an emergent intra-religious discord in the online electoral discourse, mainly among the Christian group. Members who displayed favouritism to an outgroup cause, in this case, the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket, are framed as Other. They are denied the membership of being a Christian. The study concludes with imperative advocacy for the cultivation of critical religious tolerance, a model and practice for engendering a respectful and inclusive political environment beyond religious affiliations.

Keywords: Religion, Othering, electoral discourse, demonisation, ingroup ostracisation, stereotyping, critical religious tolerance

Introduction

Religion is a chief characteristic of Nigerian identity and influences the algorithm of its public life. With over 95% of the Nigerian population belonging to Christian and Islamic communities (McKinnon, 2021), religion occupies a critical position in the country's socio-cultural and political discourse. During elections, religious affiliation often informs people's decisions about their choice and the support of political parties and candidates (Nwankwo, 2019). However, this interaction of religion and politics always comes with its attendant risks, especially because of Nigeria's volatile security environment and its history, which has been disrupted by violent sectarian conflicts. In past elections, the influence of religion on electoral practice has worsened pre-existing disunities in the context of religion, with inimical consequences (Agunyai & Ikedinma, 2022).

In the lead-up to the 2023 Nigerian general elections, religious conflicts were more starkly revealing than at any time in recent history. The reason, not farfetched, was, perhaps, the emergence of two Muslims as presidential and vice-presidential candidates of the ruling All Progressives Congress Party (APC). The choice of these candidates unleashed a hurricane of controversy among other religious groups in Nigeria, most especially the Christian group, who may have adjudged the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket as a threat to the existing age-long practice of religious inclusivity and balancing in Nigerian politics. The Muslim-Muslim ticket is considered an Islamisation agenda (Omokri, 2022). With the seeming imbalance of religious sensitivity and stakes, coupled with the intensifying insurgency by the Boko Haram group in Northern Nigeria and the ethno-religious violent conflicts in the past, the APC presidential

ticket was opposed by clerics and pews. Online social media platforms turned into a battlefield, with supporters of opposing faiths accusing one another and exhuming buried grievances.

These online disputes and grievances may stem from the essentialisation of religious identity, or what may be referred to as religious othering. The identity of Christian and Islam communities is largely established on "identifications and exclusions by differentiating between us and them, the self and the other" (Pandey 2006, p. 114). Broadly put, religious othering may be a process of building and maintaining existing fundamental religious differences between an ingroup and outgroup, us and them and self and other, to gain or reinforce positive ingroup religious identity. In online political threads, for instance, Muslims and Christians may discursively classify each other as the "Other" because they believe that the other is different from them in some aspects that they have come to regard as being essential to their ingroup identity. So, when an ingroup (us) *other* an outgroup (them) due to religious differences, they aim to reinforce differences and to essentialise the outgroup identity, denying them the natural right to be different. This may be extended to the stakes each group has on political issues or the support they could give or derive for themselves. It could also challenge why two Muslims should not be the president and vice president of a multi-ethnic Nigeria at the same time or the presidency should be dominated by one religion over a more extended period. Notably, religious othering exists in Nigeria. They are mainly discursive in social media, but their existence in the social media space is scarcely represented in literature.

Based on the foregoing, the present study examines discourse of religious othering on Facebook during Nigeria's 2023 general elections to decipher discursive and representational patterns of how netizens are intolerant of supporters of opposing faiths in online social media platforms in the context of the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections. By doing this, we can comprehend the ramifications of upholding the democratic principles of inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence in the multifaith environment of Nigeria. While existing scholarship (e.g., Babalola, 2020; Ikechukwu-Ibe & Aboh, 2024) has elucidated religious influences on voting patterns and established the connection between faith, ethnicity, and historical tensions, little research has utilised online social media data to uncover the discursive processes underlying religious intolerance in Nigeria.

Given the prevalent use of online social media platforms as a "public sphere where public debate takes place on societal issues" (Ononye et al., 2021, p. 21), they tend to have a growing influence over opinions. Hence, examining these opinions may point to the extent to which religious intolerance is magnified or reduced and the impact on real-world polarisation. Moreover, with the current complex democratic, nation-building, and security challenges, Nigeria faces the risk of being worsened by a lack of compromise over the role of faith in its fractious politics. Based on the findings and analysis, this study provides recommendations to foster critical religious tolerance and encourage an inclusive national identity above religious differences.

2. Elections and religious-based polarisation in Nigeria

As a democratic country with a multi-party system, Nigeria conducts general elections every four years to elect a new president, legislatures and governors. Existing linguistic studies on electoral discourse in Nigeria have examined ethnic othering (Aboh et al., 2024), representations of elections and political actors on print and new media (Oyeleye & Osisanwo, 2013), and campaign speeches and songs (Osisanwo, 2021). These studies used critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how politicians and electorates utilise linguistic strategies, such as polarisation, historicisation and songs, to express their political ideologies and

construct an ideological square. The polarisation in Nigeria's electoral discourse is observable at the ethnic, religious, and political party levels (Mbah et al., 2019). Ethnic and religious othering is often attributed to the mismanagement of Nigeria's multicultural nature, given the inequitable distribution of resources and religious bias (Agbedo, 2019). It has also been linked to an escape strategy that politicians use to deflate attention from their incompetence and hollow manifesto (Nwangwu & Ononogbu, 2014). This position agrees with the Marxian dictum that religion is the opium of people.

There are three major religious groups in Nigeria: Muslims (53.5%), Christians (45.9%) and African Traditional Religion (0.6%) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). As expected, religious tensions during elections in Nigeria are between Muslims and Christians owing to the number of its practitioners and their status in political and socioeconomic domains. To strike a balance and promote inclusion, the *de facto* practice has been whenever a presidential candidate is a Christian, the vice president will be a Muslim, and vice versa. This practice has created a sense of belonging among Muslims and Christians. However, in the build-up to the 2023 elections, the presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (a Muslim) announced another Muslim as its vice presidential candidate, thus generating a resistance discourse by Christians and verbally aggressive exchanges by Christians and Muslims on social media.

The animosity between Christians and Muslims observed during the 2023 general elections dates back to pre-colonial times when Usman Danfodio, a Fulani revolutionary, conquered (what has been described as Fulani Jihad) Hausaland in the early 1800s and imposed Islam on the area (Falola et al., 2018). This conquest marked the beginning of the representation of Fulani as jihadists, whose goal is to Islamise non-Muslim groups in Nigeria (Ejiofor, 2023). While Islam took root in many parts of Northern Nigeria, Christianity was predominantly practised in Southern Nigeria. The perceived marginalisation and unpleasant living conditions of non-Muslims (predominantly Christians) in Hausaland spurred them to agitate for the creation of the Middle Belt region (such as Benue and Plateau states) where they could easily practice their own religion (Barnes, 2007). During colonial times, the tension between Christians and Muslims was heightened by the colonialist's recognition of the Muslim leaders, the Emirs and Suadana of Sokoto and their use as a means of achieving the divide and rule policy. As Akande (2020, p. 461) notes, "Because this governance design ostensibly privileged Islamic institutions, Muslim rulers, and Muslim populations to the detriment of non-Muslim religious populations, critics of the colonial state, especially European Christian missionaries, labelled it 'Muslim sub-imperialism.'" Highlighting the power of religious leaders in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, a participant in Angerbrandt's (2018, p. 161) study recounts:

> If you want this place to burst into fire today, if the religious leaders call their people – just give them 30 minutes – they tell their people 'go out and fight' and they will turn the community upside down. … The governor is calling for the religious leaders to come for security reasons. Then he will brief them on what is going on and the governor will also beg them to help in calming down the situation … Whenever their leaders say 'go', they remove all their fear. Even if they are going to die they will still go. If the religious leaders say 'no, leave it', you will see things calming down.

This statement may highlight the loyalty of Muslims to their leaders and their readiness to sacrifice their lives for what they believe. Christian leaders have also been found to mobilise their followers during their sermons to vote for Christian candidates (Agunyai & Ikedinma, 2022). Thus, the privilege that the colonialists gave northern leaders made the Hausa/Fulani Muslims a politically dominant group after Nigeria's independence, given that they have produced several Military Heads of State and democratic presidents. This dominance and the

fear of 'Arab-Muslim expansion' (Ojukwu, 1969) was a major reason for the Nigerian-Biafra War (1967-1970), which intensified the polarisation between Northern Muslims and Southern Christians. In other words, the dominance of Muslims in politics, the lopsided appointments by the Buhari administration, Boko Haram bombings and banditry in the North East, Fulani herders menace in North Central and Southern Nigeria and the negative framing of Muslims in the Press as having a proclivity for armed violence, there has been an upsurge of Islamophobia by non-Muslims and non-Hausa/Fulani (Aboh & Agbedo, 2020; Ejiofor, 2023). The fear of Islamisation of Nigeria may have prompted non-Muslims' resistance to APC's Muslim/Muslim presidential and their use of fake Bishops during the unveiling of Shettima as the vice presidential candidate. Angerbrandt (2018), in his study of post-electoral violence in Kaduna after the 2011 elections, notes that the conflict between the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and Christians has resulted in a series of clashes where many Christians in Southern Kaduna have lost their lives. He also remarks that Muslim organisations regard such killings as 'ethno-religious cleansing'.

A critical look at the literature on Nigerian elections from 1999 to 2023 (marking the beginning of democratic rule to the last election) reflects a consensus among researchers that there is a deepening relationship between ethnicity, religion and elections (e.g., Angerbradnt, 2018; Mbah et al., 2019). These factors interact with the struggle for political power and serve as the foundation for the emergence of (post-)electoral violence (Ani & Ojakorotu, 2022). Despite the recognition of religion as an important factor in Nigerian electoral discourse, there has been little research on religious othering on social media from a critical discourse perspective. Examining how netizens constructed the religious 'Other' would help illuminate the discursive strategies they use and the stereotypes they draw upon, which may aid in offering suggestions for respect for diversity, inclusion, religious tolerance and democratic processes.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2004) of the representations of other religious groups in Nigeria's electoral discourse. We have termed this phenomenon "religious othering" as it comprises netizens' perceptions and descriptions of "religious Others" on social media. The rationale for CDA as a method for language analysis is that social actors use language to indicate social power relations (van Dijk, 1995) and therefore, CDA researchers aim to uncover the power and ideology that underlies the use of language in perpetuating hegemonic and discriminatory practices that lead to the othering of certain social groups. Because texts are prone to multiple interpretations (Fairclough, 1995), are employed to amplify or downplay certain perceptions in society and can be used to convey different social meanings as well as "particular (and sometimes religiously charged ideological) perspectives… delicately and covertly" (Bastone, 1995, p. 198-199), CDA researchers attempt to account for how language reproduces unequal social relations and call for social change by exposing how the covert use of language contributes to social inequality. This paper aims to explain the relationship between discourse and social practice. Therefore, we pay attention to the discursive strategies and their linguistic realisations utilised by netizens in Nigerian electoral discourse to construct the religious Other. We then draw conclusions based on our interpretation of the discursive strategies and offer suggestions for respecting diversity, inclusion, religious tolerance and democratic processes in a multi-religious context.

As indicated earlier, the background of inter-religious conflict in Nigeria affirms the animosity that exists between Christians and Muslims, which dictates how these religious groups perceive and engage with each other. This has led to electoral violence and what seems to be the normalisation of the killing of Christians by Muslim organisations as an act of

religious cleansing (Angerbrandt, 2018). The apparent inequality and imbalance in religious representation in politics in post-independence Nigeria, making Muslims the dominant group, has created a polarised society within which Nigerian politics takes place. Undeniably, this has brought into being the religious tension that characterises Nigerian elections. To understand how historical religious divisions produce discourses that depict one group as fundamentally alien and excluded, leading to a religious group perceiving itself as different from and superior to another religious group, a theoretical framework that extends the boundaries of our understanding of how one religious group perceives itself as different and better than the other is required. As such, we draw on the theoretical notion of Othering in this study.

The notion of othering that this paper draws on is a common discursive process in intercultural settings where one group perceives itself as different from another (Aboh et al., 2024). Usually, one group assigns certain attributes to the other using language to categorise that group negatively or positively. When language is used in this way, it can create group polarity and aid in the othering of groups. The dichotomy that emerges from discourses of othering has been associated with gender, race and cultural discrimination (Aboh et al., 2024; Petros et al., 2006), among others, leading to isolation and marginalisation. Consequently, this form of othering creates binaries such as 'us' versus 'them', 'superior' versus 'inferior', or 'good' versus 'bad' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 1988) using stereotypes that enable negative Other-presentation while promoting positive self-presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Staszak (2008) notes that the group presented negatively and subsequently 'othered' is defined by negative values imposed by the group that perceives itself as dominant. This agrees with Udah (2018) that although such values may be recognisable, they are not inherent per se.

However, it appears that othering provides a rationale for the stigmatisation of the non-dominant group, which serves to assert the superiority of the dominant group. While this group differentiation underscores the polarisation in the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy, it accentuates the ideological differences that (re)produce power inequality in group relations. Concerning the role of ideology in establishing dichotomous groups in society, van Dijk (1988, p. 267) proposes the 'ideological square' as a framework to unravel how positive ingroup and negative outgroup are discursively (re)produced in discourse. It comprises emphasising positive information about Us, emphasising negative information about Them, de-emphasising information that is positive about Them, and de-emphasising information that is negative about Us. This ideological square is realised by discourses that demonstrate the use of threats, negative depictions, assigning/obscuring agency, blame and responsibility for particular actions (van Dijk, 1988), as well as voice suppression (Grove & Zwi, 2006), to present the non-dominant group negatively and the dominant group positively. The othering from such discourses is found in our analysis of the Facebook comments analysed in this study. Thus, in the present study, we draw on the insights above to demonstrate how religion and the systematic othering of ethno-religious groups in Nigeria are accounted for in the electoral discourses of netizens on social media (i.e., Facebook comments).

4. Data and analytical procedure

For this study, a dataset comprising 14,426 Facebook comments was collected from the official Facebook pages of five renowned national newspapers, namely, The Punch, Vanguardngr, The Sun, The Nation, and Premium Times. These sources were selected based on their broad readership, both in print and online. The comments were exclusively extracted from posts related to the 2023 Nigerian general elections, specifically focusing on the APC Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket. The selection of Kashim Shettima, a Northern Nigerian Muslim, as the APC presidential running mate to Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Southwest Nigerian Muslim,

sparked an electrifying buzz in online electoral discourse, especially in Nigeria, a multi-religious country. The period of the posts and comments spanned from 22 August 2022 (pre-election) to 20 March 2023 (post-election). Facebook was chosen as the primary platform for data collection due to its widespread usage in Nigeria, second only to WhatsApp (a messaging app) in terms of popularity (Statista, 2023). Moreover, Facebook attracts users from diverse social classes and age groups, reaching beyond the scope of just "enlightened and self-conscious people", as described by BBC News Africa in reference to Twitter. The data were collected using the website www.exportcomments.com and saved in Excel files, including nested comments during the scraping process.

The analytical procedure we utilised is Fairclough's (1992) three-level process of identification, interpretation, and explanation. We first identified the language netizens used to construct the Other by closely reading their comments on Facebook during Nigeria's elections. We determined whether the way a word or expression was used expressed otherness by checking its meaning from the dictionary, context of usage and extant literature. We then created a list of lexical categories based on how these words were used in the texts. We cross-checked the list of lexical categories with two independent CDA analysts to assess the semantic meaning of the linguistic choices of interest. This was important to resolve any possible contradictions about the themes assigned to the words and expressions we identified. Before proceeding with the interpretation, we grouped the lexical categories on our list according to their specific ideas of othering. This categorisation enabled us to group themes based on the specific realities of the religious othering they represented. Finally, our interpretation of the themes drew on the socio-historical context of the comments, Nigeria's history, and available background information on religious groups. We then offered the possible implications of the religious polarisation that underlay the comments and highlighted the linguistic, argumentation and discursive strategies that contributed to the othering of religious groups that facilitated the demonisation, ostracisation and stereotyping of religious groups. We conclude by discussing the importance of critical religious tolerance in reducing religious biases and promoting tolerance and respect for religious diversity.

5. Analysis and discussion

An analysis of the data resulted in three discursive strategies, which posters used in religious profiling during the 2023 Nigerian general elections. These strategies are: religious othering through demonisation, othering through ingroup ostracisation, and stereotype-based religious othering. We discuss these strategies in turn.

5.1 Religious othering through demonisation

Demonisation refers to the portrayal of the Other as demonic (Nartey, 2019). The use of such derogatory term to represent others has become prevalent in contemporary political discourse and media constructions of marginalised groups (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). To frame others as demonic, discourses of demonisation, that is, discourses that cast others in an adversarial light and seek to undermine their credibility and delegitimise their moral sanity, are often used to foreground oppositional differences. In this way, demonisation and the discourses that help to construct it serve as a tool to stigmatise and facilitate the marginalisation and potential endangerment of other's lives. Woodward et al. (2014) noted that, in a climate of religious intolerance, one religious group might use hate speech and discursive frames to reinforce their scepticism and underscore the other group's deviance from a perceived righteous way of doing things to demonise them and sometimes legitimate the use of brute force against them. As can be seen in the excerpts below, there were instances in our data where

netizens drew on discourses of demonisation, especially in reference to the Muslim-Muslim ticket of presidential candidates put forward by the APC.

Excerpt 1

1. I don't agree. This APC ticket is dead on arrival. We are extremely Obicentric and Obidently committed to end the evils of APC and PDP
2. Those are the kind of people using religion for their selfish benefit. We say no to evil's ideas of the devils
3. Not only demonic, barbaric, satanic and devilish, but shameless, uncalled-for and unhealthy for our national unity

The posts in Excerpt 1 are perceptions based on the APC's decision to field candidates for the presidential elections who were both Muslims. The apparent mono-religious background of the candidates, generally, did not reflect the religious diversity in Nigeria and the political party, more specifically. Thus, these Facebook posts demonstrate that posters do not support the decision of the parties in question. This overt dissent in the tone of the posts is, perhaps, due to the assumption by many Nigerians that presenting only Muslim presidential candidates constituted a vicious flouting of the long-standing politico-moral norms of Nigerian society. Excerpt 1 shows that the posters' explicit mention of the nominal acronyms APC and PDP functions to identify categories of the groups to be demonised for their perceived deviance from what has been historically commonly practised. Given the unprecedented nature of the APC's decision to present only Muslims as presidential candidates and its implication for the long-standing equity in religious representation in Nigeria politics, it is perhaps not far-fetched to assume that these posters perceive the APC, even if temporarily, as a Muslim cabal, indicating a type of particularised or microcosmic synecdoche in which a part is used for the whole. At the same time, it is possible to imagine that these posts may be more specifically targeting the Muslims in the APC, given that there are also Christians in these parties who may not have been in favour of the choice of only Muslim presidential candidates.

As such, the expression "I don't agree" (1) suggests how one group's (most likely Christian non-APC members in this case) dissent of specific political decisions and sometimes disaffection for specific actors can degenerate into a religiophobic categorisation that can serve the purpose of homogenising an otherwise diverse group in an attempt to demonise and subsequently facilitate the othering of another group or subgroup. Thus, the 'demonic' traits attributed to the APC highlighted by the use of negative descriptive adjectives in (3) such as 'barbaric', 'selfish' and 'shameless', 'evil', 'demonic', 'satanic', 'devilish' can be taken as a form of demonisation discourse employed to represent Muslims as the "phobic enemy" (Ameli et al., 2007, p. 12) and a source of the ills of the Nigeria society. As noted by Bhabha (1994), the concept of (religious) othering, resulting in the labelling of groups, emanates from the desire to emphasise the harmful and undesirable traits of particular groups of people to affirm the claim that they are a threat. When it comes to religious othering, there has been far less sympathy for Muslims than, for example, Christians, as the literature suggests that the media, particularly in the West, and especially after the events of 9/11, have increasingly negativised and demonised Muslims (Nurullah, 2010) by employing a variety of semiotic resources to incite hatred for Muslims (Werbner, 2005).

The media's role in the negativisation and othering of Muslims can be seen in how the media, in recent times, (re)enact stereotypes to represent Muslims, leading to the widespread radicalisation of Muslims and Islamophobia, which have become the most common form of contemporary racism in Europe (Mahamdallie, 2015). In a comparative analysis of 607 New

York Times articles from 1969 to 2014 and 850 government documents, speeches, and other official communications, Silva (2017) found that the media's views of radicalisation, which in the past pointed more to political and economic differences, have now changed to a stronger focus on Islam. Radicalisation and its demonising tendency were found to be utilised as a discursive tool by the media to negatively portray Muslims as a threat and an "alien other" (p. 138) to the West. Drawing from the notion of othering, the sentiments of the posts above seem to position the APC, in particular, and Islam, in general, in direct opposition to the normative political values and beliefs of Nigerian society. In this way, the posters deploy the discursive strategy of demonisation realised through nomination and predication to create conceptual distinctions that function to construct an implicit notion of "us" and "them" through reference to negative descriptors that work to bolster the phobic enemy vilification and othering of Muslims due to the Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC for the presidential elections.

Thus, the adjectives in Excerpt 1 that reinforce these undesirable traits of the APC in the posts also evoke strong imageries of destruction and diabolism that help to negatively evaluate and offensively frame them as Muslim groups that are potentially dangerous and whose actions are "unhealthy to national unity" (3) and inimical to the sustained culture of balanced religious representation in selecting presidential candidates for elections in Nigeria's history of party politics. Pandey (2004) observes that the use of negative adjectives aims to provoke negative emotions in the reader toward the "Other" and, perhaps, irremediably demonising the "Other" too, which can contribute to the hate of the "Other".

It is discernible from (1) that the posters are members of the opposition Labour Party (LP) headed by the Christian presidential candidate, Peter Obi. Hence, the terms "Obicentric" and "Obidiently" are coinages that suggest their full support for Peter Obi's candidacy. Given his religious affiliation, it seems likely that Christian supporters of Peter Obi wrote these posts to express their disagreement with what appears to be a domineering religious decision by the APC to field only Muslim presidential candidates for elections. In a hostile ethno-political climate like Nigeria, characterised by an overt Christian-Muslim dichotomy, where social and economic grievances intersect with religion, perceptions of one religion's ills or evils can spring from nowhere to facilitate the marginalisation and othering of that religion. It is implied in (2) that the demonstrative pronoun 'those' anaphorically refers to the APC, whose choice of party leaders is evaluated based on religion rather than political competence. Here, religion seems to be viewed as a medium for achieving sectarian interests rather than national goals and, therefore, plays a divisive role rather than a unifying factor. What is considered an 'evil idea', evidentially, is the Muslims' imposition of their preferred candidates, hence their description as 'devils'. According to Juergensmeyer et al. (2022), the term 'devil', when used in reference to people, may suggest that human beings are in contention with God. Following Juergensmeyer et al. (2022) and keeping in mind the context of these electoral discourses, one may go so far as to say that the Muslim cabals of APC are being positioned as enemies of God (obviously the Christian God) who must be voted against. This might be speculative, yet it offers some insights into how secular politics and spiritual phenomena can sometimes coalesce into demonising discourses that can be used to differentiate and dehumanise a group based on religion to construct them as the Other.

5.2 Othering through ingroup ostracisation

The 2023 Nigerian general election demonstrated that religion is a theatre of othering. Another form through which the othering plays out is ingroup ostracisation. Social psychology has accounted for the discrepancy between outgroup hostility and ingroup favouritism (Grigoryan et al., 2023). Moral similarity nurtures ingroup members' bias, making members willing to

favour the ingroup but also hate the outgroup. However, when does ingroup love turn to ingroup hate, and what discursive strategies do they adopt? In this case, ingroup criticism is one way in which ingroup favouritism is questioned. Ingroup members can openly acknowledge the weaknesses of the group. They can also criticise their group and be perceived as black sheep (Reiman & Killoran, 2023). A different level of ingroup hatred beyond criticism is evident in the electoral discourse under examination. It is ingroup ostracisation and is dissimilar to ingroup criticism. Ingroup ostracisation is conceptualised here as the banning or negative exclusion, or threat to do so, of ingroup members who favour outgroup members or their cause. Ingroup members are excluded or denied membership in the group and are considered black sheep due to perceived differences or variations in beliefs or their gone-astray positions. The ingroup ostracisation is typically realised through labelling and other inherent discursive strategies.

At the height of the pre-election in 2022, especially during the presidential party primary elections, every group in Nigeria, ethnic and religious, started positioning for relevance by lobbying for a member of a group to emerge as a presidential and/or vice-presidential candidate of the major political parties with a national outlook, especially the ruling political party, APC. The emergence of BAT and Shettima, both core Muslims, as candidates for the APC brought discord in the inter-religious harmony in Nigeria. What is especially interesting in the wake of this Muslim-Muslim ticket is the emergent intra-religious discord, mainly among Christians. Members who displayed favouritism to the outgroup cause, in this case, Muslim-Muslim tickets, are framed as Other. They are denied membership in being a Christian. From the excerpts below, we can see how the memberships of some Nigerians in Christendom were questioned and subtly excluded.

Excerpt 2

4. God forbid. I cannot and will never support Same faith Ticket. Only a ma.d Christian who has no value for his religion will support the Islamization agenda.
5. We know. Only a cursed person will vote for them and yet u see some wayward and lose Christians campaigning for them
6. Can Muslim accept that? The anwser is capital No! Any Christian that vote for Apc is against body of Christ as a Christian.
7. True Christians will not vote A.P.C PETER OBI is our choice

These comments demonstrate clear instances of prejudice and discrimination within the same religious group. Individuals are subjected to derogatory remarks and accusations based on their support of Muslim-Muslim tickets. This intra-religious prejudice perpetuates divisions and fosters the belief that those who do not conform to specific religious or political alignments are misguided or unworthy. The excerpts also involve stereotyping and stigmatisation of membership of ingroup. The premodifiers in the noun phrases such “ma.d Christian” (4) and “wayward and lose Christians” (5) are used to demean and generalise individuals who hold different views within the Christians. This stigmatisation undermines unity and creates divisions among people who should ideally share common religious beliefs. Those ingroup members supporting a Muslim-Muslim ticket are portrayed as problematic, and their choices are dismissed as “rubbish.” This binary thinking ostracises. It hinders open dialogue and understanding, perpetuating divisions and hindering the possibility of a united front among individuals who should be working towards common goals. In their comments, there is a preponderance of modifiers such as “lexical adjectives” and determiners like “only”, “any”, and “some”. In most of the co-occurrences of the modifiers and determiners with religious keywords such as “Christian”, “Muslim”, or “Islam”, a semantic preference of exclusion and

ostracisation is deduced. For instance, in Excerpt 2, no 5, it is seen that Christians who have values for their faith are subtly excluded from being a mad Christian. In Excerpt 2, the restrictive determinative function of "only", "any", and the adjective "true" in co-occurrences with the labellings, namely, "mad christian", "cursed person", "wayward and lose Christians" "[anti] christian" and "[false] Christian" institute ostracisation of ingroup members. The strategy of ingroup ostracisation, through which religious othering in the data is evident, is further realised through three discursive sub-strategies, which are discussed below.

Firstly, the membership of Christians who show support for the Muslim-Muslim ticket is delegitimised and vilified by fellow Christians. The netizens labelled them as "ma.d" (mad) (4), "cursed' (5), "wayward", and "lose" (5) in Excerpt 2. This is an attempt to create division between ingroup members. These lexical designations imply that ingroup members lack religious commitment. More so, the labels imply a lack of moral or religious adherence and are intended to portray the supporters as misguided or deviant within their own religious community. Also, by referring to ingroup members who support the APC Muslim-Muslim ticket as "cursed," the netizen seeks to marginalise and cast them as morally or spiritually deficient.

Secondly, loyalty or solidarity is a critical index of ingroup membership. Defined as the "adherence to a social unit to which one belongs, as well as its goals, symbols, and beliefs" (Jame & Cropanzano 1994, p. 179), loyalty determines the success of a group (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). When members are loyal, they remain in the group, but when they are disloyal, they leave or are ostracised. In (6), the netizen exemplarily reflects on the religious loyalty of Muslims who might not consider voting for a specific political party on a Christian-Christian ticket. The loyalty of Muslims is in sharp contrast to that of the Christians. The netizen's lexical string "Any Christian that vote for Apc is against body of Christ" seeks to ostracise ingroup members due to a dichotomy between religious loyalty and political choices, suggesting that voting for a particular party is incompatible with being a faithful Christian. Lastly, who people are and who they choose to give political support to during elections may raise questions about the dual identity of true or double-standard Christians or Muslims. Religious communities are often intolerant of one another (Dowd, 2016). Hence, ingroup members who show intergroup bias due to favouritism to an outgroup cause are ostracised from the group. In Excerpt 2 (7), the netizen asserts the notion of a "True Christian" and implies that voting for a specific party, in this case, A.P.C., is not aligned with this idealised true Christian identity. By making this assertion, the netizen establishes a sense of exclusion for Christians who may hold different political preferences.

The ingroup ostracisation evident in the online social media electoral discourse has significant implications for intra-religious unity and democratic processes in Nigeria. Ingroup ostracisation establishes divisions within the religious community and devalues and marginalises those who hold different political views. By ostracising ingroup members with different political views, we send them away instead of letting them leave themselves. This practice blocks any opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue and bridge the gaps between different factions. Furthermore, this undermines the potential for collaboration and unity, hindering progress and fostering fragmentation. Next, we move to stereotype-based religious othering.

5.3 Stereotype-based religious othering

Stereotypes represent culturally defined positive and negative pictures in our heads, which serve as a cognitive shortcut for representing members of a social, cultural or political group

(Lippmann, 1922). In other words, stereotypes are culturally shared and often learned during socialisation and publicised by the media (Ladegaard, 2020). As a cognitive shortcut mechanism, Allport (1954) argues that associating a particular trait with every group member saves people the stress of dealing with group members as individuals. In our data, we found instances where netizens drew on stereotypes often associated with Muslims to religiously profile them during elections, as illustrated in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3

8. "What are the contribution of Muslim in the country apart of terrorism, raping, underage marriage and banditry activities. You can never compare a Christian state to any Muslim state in Nigeria here. Brainless animals like you"
9. "The issue is that Tinubu and Shetima are jihadist extremists in conjunction with #fulaniterrorists terrorism 👳⚔️😈 now you know🤪🐏🐏🐏"
10. "In a society where Muslim terrorists are on the lose and it appears that Northern Muslim governors and the Muslim president are sympathetic to their course, how can APC make such a blunder? Maybe it's a deliberate insult on Christians"

The above posts are reactions to Tinubu's, then presidential candidate and a Muslim (current Nigerian president), the announcement of Shetima as his vice presidential candidate for the election. As already stated, this is the first time in the history of Nigeria that presidential and vice presidential candidates in a general election would be of the same religion. In communicating their resistance to this decision, non-Muslims and non-members of the All Progressive Congress (APC) resorted to religious profiling of these candidates and all Muslims. In Excerpt 3, we observe the preponderant use of the nominations "Muslim", "Tinubu", "Shetima", "Muslim terrorists", "Muslim president", and "APC" to foreground the individuals and groups whose stereotypical traits are to be highlighted. These nominations are qualified using the negative predications "terrorism, raping, underage marriage, banditry activities", "brainless animals", and "jihadist extremists". The use of the first three emojis (9) can be interpreted as a discursive strategy that links Muslims to negative and dangerous identities. This strategy reinforces an evaluative hierarchy in which Muslims are explicitly positioned as dangerous, whereas non-Muslims are implicitly represented as morally superior. These negative emojis are juxtaposed with dancing emojis, which function as the poster's happiness that s/he has revealed a secret about Tinubu and Shettima. Emojis in social media communication are resources used by posters to create a vivid picture of their evaluations and highlight their stake in their accounts (Aboh, 2024). These negative stereotypes may be a strategy the posters use to justify their stance against the Muslim/Muslim presidential ticket, alleging that voting for Tinubu and Shettima may heighten terrorism in Nigeria. It is noticeable that there is an absence of any positive predication for the named groups and individuals, suggesting that the posters are high-prejudice people who only activate a store of predominantly negative outgroup stereotypes (Augoustinos et al., 2014).

The ideology and stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists and extremists are echoed in the literature on the representation of Muslims in the media. In their analysis of the representations around the word 'Muslim' in the British Press between 1998 and 2009, Baker et al. (2013) found that out of the 84,671 instances of Muslims in the corpora, 'extremist' and 'terrorist' appeared as noun collocates of 'Muslim' for 1,740 and 467 times, respectively. Thus, the category 'Conflict' with noun collocates such as extremist, fanatic, terrorist, and fundamentalist was the second most occurring collocate category in terms of types (26.2%) after characterising/differentiating attributes type (29.8%). It exemplifies the claim that the media publicises and perpetuates stereotypical beliefs about ethnic and religious groups by

focusing on their negative attributes (van Dijk, 1991). This conflict sentiment shared by the British Press and Nigerian Press appears to be drawn by the posters to perpetuate the stereotypical representation of Muslims during the 2023 elections.

Observable in the excerpt is the polarisation between Christians (us) and Muslims (them), signalled by the comparison between Christian and Muslim states (9), tagging Muslims 'brainless' and 'animals' as opposed to 'humans' (8) as well as representing Christians as the oppressed (10) based on the 'insult' against their existence and religion. This polarisation strategy echoes Said's (1978) submission that negative descriptions of the Other's identity are realised by highlighting who we are *not* rather than who we *are.* Thus, when the posters who are Christians stereotype Muslims as being brainless and insulting, it reveals characteristics the posters' group do not possess and wish their group. By tapping into socially shared beliefs about Muslims, the posters reinforce dominant narratives of Muslim culpability and Christian victimhood. They potentially perpetuate these stereotypes and intensify the tension between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Such a religiously based electoral discourse may also reflect the grievances of Christians due to the Tinubu and APC's disrespect for diversity and inclusion, exemplifying their understanding of the fragility of Nigeria as a nation and the potential negative consequences of excluding a religious group to which 46% Nigerians belong (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). This decision, described as a 'blunder' (10), demonstrates the importance of religion in Nigeria's electoral process, suggesting that when the status quo is changed, aggrieved individuals may use different othering strategies to resist it, including emphasising perceived aggressors' bad deeds (van Dijk, 2004).

In addition to stereotyping and profiling Muslims on the basis of terrorism and extremism, the non-Muslim posters also draw on the stereotype of Islamisation as a strategy for othering Muslims, as Excerpt 4 exemplifies.

Excerpt 4

11. "Even with the structures APC claims it has, the fear of loosing election pushed it to Muslim Muslim ticket. Islamization is the major target."
12. "Any attempt to Islamise Nigeria will mean the end of the country, let us go back to regional government, some part of this country are very very lazy, they don't want to work with their hands."
13. "Nigerians needs help. Say no to Muslim Muslim ticket. Say no to APC government. Say no for the Islamization of Nigeria"
14. "Muslim-Muslim ticket will qualify Nigeria, a secular State, to become a full member of Organisation of Islamic Country (OIC). Muslim-Muslim ticket is Islamic Government in nature, Islamic terrorism and Sharia law will rule the land like Afghanistan. This is not in anyway a good narrative because Christianity is denigrated."

In Excerpt 4, we see instances of conspiracy theories about Muslims' goal (through the Muslim presidential and vice presidential candidates of the APC) to Islamise Nigeria if elected. (11) presents an example in which this attribution is applied. The poster uses the strategy of *double attribution,* where s/he secondarily attributes the APC Muslim/Muslim ticket as a means of winning the election and primarily as a "major" way of achieving Islamisation. This discursive positioning suggests that the APC's short-term goal of embarking on the same faith ticket is to win the election, while the long-term goal is to Islamise Nigeria. Agunyai and Ikedinma (2022) maintain that the fear of losing an election and the perception that election is a 'do-or-die-affair' are some of the factors responsible for religious-based hate speeches in Nigeria's electoral discourse.

Combining the Islamisation and "lazy" stereotypes prefaced by the intensifier "very" (12) calls for a return to the regional government, practised before the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967-1970, where different regions in Nigeria have relative autonomy. (13) uses a three-part list containing the repetition of "Say no" to emphasise the need to reject any plan to Islamise Nigeria. Not only was the Muslim/Muslim ticket presented as a tool for Islamisation, but the poster in (14) notes that the act itself is inherently an Islamic government, which qualifies Nigeria as a member of the Organisation of Islamic Country. It draws on an intertextual reference to Afghanistan as a template to create a picture of how Nigeria will be if the 'narrative' is unchanged, thus positioning Muslims as undesirable and a potential source of harm. The mention of "Islamic terrorism and Sharia law" perpetuates the stereotype of Muslims as extremists and instigators of unrest.

Recurrent in these posts are the verb 'Islamise' and its nominal equivalent 'Islamization', highlighting the issue upon which posters present Muslims as the 'Other'. This stereotype of Islamisation positions Muslims as a group that inhibits freedom of worship and mobilises dissent among non-Muslims. The sentiments and stereotypes that Islamic extremists will Islamise Nigeria are one of the causes of Islamophobia in Nigeria and have triggered anti-Muslim hostilities (Ejiofor, 2023). A common feature of stereotypes is that they always have a complete or partial element of falsity about reality (Schaff, 1980), which is exaggerated when discussing the group to which they are attached. The stereotype posters orient to in their posts signifies the deep-seated religious tensions and power struggles that exist in Nigeria, which need to be addressed.

6. A critical religious tolerance in Nigeria's *electosphere*

Religion is a chief characteristic of Nigerian identity. It easily breeds ingroup favouritism during elections. In fact, slightly incompatible behaviour, especially during any election in Nigeria, may be considered "haram" or blasphemy and could lead to massacre, arson, or mob action. The discursive strategies of othering indexed through ingroup ostracisation, stereotyping, and demonisation of people based on religious biases, as seen in the previous section, are evidence of religious intolerance. Religious intolerance may be caused and perpetuated by ignorance, bigotry, and the broadcasting of disinformation, especially in a politically intense climate like the election period. The existence and perpetuity of religious intolerance during elections in Nigeria is a clog in the wheel of democratisation on the one hand and a threat to national unity on the other. This imperative arises for the exigent cultivation of critical religious tolerance. By this, we mean a reflective model and practice for engendering a respectful and inclusive political environment beyond religious affiliations.

Practising critical religious tolerance during volatile periods, such as election time, means that people should accept political ideas and candidates with whom they do not share religious affiliations. It is a deliberate act of accepting divergent perspectives (Graumann, 1996). It is neither indifference nor neutrality (Verkuyten & Killen, 2021). It is also not an acceptance of social disapproval, fear, sanction, or saving one's face (Cohen, 2004). The strength of this critical religious tolerance rests on the African philosophies signalled by Igbo adages, thus, "egbe bere ugo bere", which means "live and let live", and "uche onye adịghị njọ", which means that one's thought and, by extension, the religious belief system is as good as another. Of course, not every Nigerian will share this position. However, critical religious tolerance may be realised through three practical understandings.

Firstly, it is crucial to understand that diverse religious stances are relevant to our nation's political and social progress. This understanding will reduce the ideology of winner-takes-all

that characterises Nigeria's political landscape, where politicians work assiduously for their own religious group. Our differences are not a curse but a blessing. Religious tolerance would reduce the religious bigotry in Nigeria, where some Salafists go online bullying Muslims who felicitate Christians on Christmas Day (Kperogi, 2023). Respect for diversity would spur Nigerians to accept the unique perspectives and values of each religion for political innovation and progress. Secondly, conscious inclusivity is critical to religious tolerance. Nigeria needs to include all religious groups, regardless of their size, to progress politically and generally as a country. Centring marginalised and peripheral voices can foster belonging among all religious groups and strengthen the country's democratic process. Finally, active and friendly engagement of other believers is critical to religious tolerance. Given that Nigerians have demonstrated noticeable levels of politico-religious intolerance, which is not healthy for maintaining true democracy and a stable political system, the government must play an active and critical role in engaging all religious groups in certain aspects, if not all, of national issues without discrimination or favouritism. This involves public efforts and sacrifices that demonstrate the acceptance and acknowledgement of all religious groups, especially those who feel alienated. Such an ecumenical gesture can potentially reduce the reclusivity and withdrawal from political participation that minority religious groups experience due to the taunts and hostility they feel and provide a sense of inclusion both in the private and public arena.

7. Conclusion

This study has provided a critical perspective on religious othering in Nigeria's 2023 electoral discourse on social media. Three major discursive strategies were uncovered - demonisation, ingroup ostracisation, and stereotyping. Demonisation occurred through attributing undesirable traits like "demonic" and "barbaric" to outgroups, leveraging emotive imageries to frame them negatively. Ingroup ostracisation manifested through tactics like delegitimising and vilifying ingroup membership, interrogating loyalties, and asserting "true" identities. Such intra-religious prejudices breed fragmentation rather than unity within faith communities. Stereotyping involved drawing on dominant portrayals of Muslims as terrorists, extremists, and agents of "Islamisation." This reinforces the social construction of Muslims as a dangerous threat to implicitly positioned morally superior Christians. These othering processes depicted religious adversaries as fundamentally alien and exclusive binaries of "us" versus "them." They served to delegitimise outgroups by emphasising perceived harms while asserting positive self-presentation. They also create binaries within the ingroup membership. The study corroborates the theoretical insights that such polarisation is (re)produced through the overt and covert use of language to naturalise dominant ideologies and perpetuate inequality. The implications are concerning for Nigeria's democracy, given its history of ethno-religious violence and the destabilising conduct of elites mobilising faith identities for political ends. The findings indicate that citizens remain polarised along religious divides, which risks being inflamed during electoral clashes over power. The online permeation of these othering narratives holds real dangers of exacerbating intolerance that spills into destructive offline clashes if left unaddressed.

Our proposal is a critical religious tolerance model prioritising inclusivity and diversity over sectarianism. First and foremost, religious and political leaders have a duty to inform followers and adherents that no religion has exclusive authority over reality or national identity. Citizenship is the source of Nigerians' civic responsibilities, not just their faith. Second, to prevent dishonest politicians from abusing religion as a tool, legislative measures should be taken to establish its boundaries away from elections clearly. Thirdly, rather than denouncing differing opinions, faith-based groups should teach their adherents to accept political

candidates of other faiths as long as they are competent and qualified for the office they are vying for. Finally, people need to interact positively across religious differences and acknowledge their common destiny as Nigerians above all other religious divisions.

We recognise that deep-seated prejudices cannot disappear overnight; however, long-term awareness campaigns can assist in mitigating intolerance by revealing the falsehood inherent in religious othering and deconstructing perceptions of zero-sum competition over national political positions. More importantly, coordinated reforms are necessary to address the underlying structural injustices that continue to be linked to faith-identity and exacerbate religious tensions. To preserve the stability, justice, and social cohesion that are essential to any thriving country, Nigeria's diverse religious populations must accept one another as the country moves forward with its democratic transition in the face of increasing adversity. Nigeria's potential to become Africa's largest superpower may be sustainably achieved for all residents, regardless of creed, with assiduous dedication to the ideas of unity in diversity.

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