

## **Ethnic othering in Nigeria's electoral discourse: The need for intercultural competence**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines online ethnic othering during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The study employs a critical discourse analytic framework and utilises a corpus of 7678 Facebook comments from Nigerians from different ethnic groups. The analysis reveals that individuals from the Yoruba ethnic group stereotype the Igbo people by questioning their legitimacy and voting rights as residents in Yoruba lands, especially Lagos. The study demonstrates how the Yoruba identity of a political opposition candidate, who has an Igbo mother and a Yoruba father, is questioned and stereotyped due to his affiliation with Igbo ethnicity. This stereotype is perpetuated through the legitimisation strategy of historicising ethnic politics, which justifies ethnic prejudices and exclusionary attitudes towards the Other. The study concludes with a call for intercultural competence, which is crucial in promoting respect for diversity, human rights, and inter-ethnic differences.

Nchọcha a lebara anya n'akpamoke agbụrụ e nwere na ntuli aka elu izugbe Naijiria e mere na 2023. Nchọcha a ji atụtụ ntụcha ụbụbọ kempuriche wee tuchaa ọdọ okwu ederede Facebook dị puku asaa, narị isii na iri asaa na asatọ nke si n'aka ndị Naijiria si n'agbụrụ dị iche iche. Ntụcha gosiri na ndị Yoruba kpara oke megide ndị Igbo site n'igbagha ikike ha nwere ịtụ vootu dị ka ndị bi n'ala Yoruba, ọ kachasị Lagos. Nchọcha gosiri etu e si gbaghaa abụmonye Yoruba nke onye na-azọsa pati na-achị ọkwa ọchịchị, onye nne ya bụ onye Igbo ma nna ya bụ onye Yoruba, nakwa ka e si kpaa oke megide ya maka mmetụta ya na ndị Igbo. E ji nrụtụ aka ihe mere n'oge gara aga gbasara agbụrụ ndị ndorọ ndorọ ọchịchị wee kwado akparamagwa akpamoke na ekworo agbụrụ. Na nchịkọta, nchọcha tonyere alo ka e nwee mmata ụbara

omenaala nke dị mkpa n'ikwalite nsopurū ndimiche, ikikere mmadū, na ndị iché dị n'etiti agburū na ibe ya.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, electoral discourse, ethnicity, online othering, social media

## **Introduction**

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, seven elections have been successfully conducted over a period of 24 years. Out of these 24 years, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) produced the president between 1999 and 2015 (16 years), while the All Progressive Congress (APC) produced the president for eight years, 2015 to date. Despite the democratic process of electing a Nigerian president every four years, Nigeria's electoral process has been characterised by propaganda, unfulfilled electoral promises, hate speech, ethnic and religious profiling, violence, corruption, irregularities, and loss of lives and property (Aboh & Ahamefula, 2018). Unlike previous elections where many Nigerians have not been proactive and resolute in their campaign for good governance, the build-up to Nigeria's 2023 general elections witnessed a call for change in government owing to the perceived failure of the then President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (Onuorah, 2022). In their call for change, several Nigerians expressed their rejection of the two dominant political parties, APC and PDP, on the one hand, and their support for the Labour Party, on the other hand, because they believed in the potential of its presidential candidate, Peter Obi, to solve a myriad of Nigerians' problems ranging from insecurity to economic meltdown (Orjinmo, 2023).

Based on the online discourses on Nigeria's 2023 general elections, while some Nigerians consider the election of a new Nigerian president from the standpoint of competence, that is, the candidate with a positive record that would address aforementioned Nigeria's problems, others consider the ethnicity of the candidates as a critical factor in the emergence of a new

president despite the individual's competence (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). With over 250 ethnic groups, elections in Nigeria are sensitive as they can result in online and offline ethnically verbal and physical aggression (Falola et al., 2018). Elections in Nigeria have often been characterised by ethnic-based politics, especially between Hausa/Yoruba and Igbo. A possible reason for this ethnic animosity can be traced to the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970. The War, which led to the killing of over three million Igbo people, deepened the rifts between three major ethnic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba). The Igbo construct the Yoruba as helping the Hausa-Fulani in the genocide against the Igbo (Madiebo, 1980). Arguably, Yoruba's goal of continuing political collaboration with Hausa/Fulani may have influenced their discriminatory actions towards the Igbo during elections.

In the build-up to the 2019 governorship elections, a Senator was reported to have said, 'We will invoke all the deities of Lagos to chase Igbo people out. Igbos who refuse to learn our language. Igbos who did not marry Yoruba, we will inherit them' (Muaz, 2022). This past ethnic othering of the Igbo may have contributed to heightened Igbophobia during the 2023 general elections. Reports have shown that suspected political thugs destroyed the property worth millions of naira owned by non-indigenes in Lagos because the non-indigenes voted against preferred candidates during the elections (Oji, 2023). The Nigeria-Biafra War and hate speeches against the Igbo in previous elections provide a background to the inter-ethnic animosity in Nigeria, especially among the Igbo and Yoruba people during the 2023 general elections.

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Northerners, particularly the Hausa Fulani, have been Nigeria's president for 11 years, the Yoruba ethnolinguistic group has governed for 8 years, while the South-South has governed for five years. Of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, only the Igbo have not become president since democratic

rule. The demand for an Igbo to become the new president of Nigeria was resisted by the Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups, who also have strong candidates, such as Atiku Abubakar of the PDP and Ahmed Tinubu of the APC, respectively, vying for the presidency.

Discursive approaches to the study of Nigeria's elections have focused on the speeches of the Independent National Electoral Commission's chairperson in 2015 (Aboh & Ahamefula, 2018), newspaper campaign advertisements in the 2011 elections (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2013), Facebook campaigns in 2015 (Felicia, 2018), and humour as a discursive strategy in Nigeria's 2015 elections (Adegoju & Oyeboode, 2015). By utilising critical discourse analysis, these studies showed how political actors such as politicians and electorates use linguistic strategies, such as metaphor, polarisation, humour, deictic pronouns, rhetorical questions and historical allusions to persuade, disseminate propaganda and legitimise their political positions. Despite the studies on Nigeria's elections, there is a dearth of research on discursive ethnic othering during Nigeria's February 25 and March 18, 2023 general elections on social media. Thus, this paper aims to identify the discursive strategies used to construct the ethnic Other, examine the linguistic strategies used for ethnic othering, and highlight the need for intercultural competence to promote ethnic tolerance and call for social justice for disenfranchised groups.

### **Othering and critical discourse analysis**

This study is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992). A core focus of CDA is to unravel the relationship between discourse and power, discourse and ideology, as well as between discourse and the hegemonic and discriminatory practices that, for example, construct identity and bring about the othering (e.g., racism, 'enemification', homophobia) of certain groups, confining them to spatial marginality. More explicitly, CDA researchers aim to account for how language reproduces unequal social relations and the dominance of one group over another. They do so by exposing how the covert use of language contributes to social

inequality and calls for social change. In this paper, because we aim to account for the relationship between discourse and social practice, we pay close attention to the discursive and linguistic choices employed in the electoral discourse of the Nigerian public to construct the ethnic Other and draw conclusions based on our interpretation of the representations that emerge and their implications for intercultural competence.

As noted earlier, the background of the inter-ethnic conflict in Nigeria demonstrates how the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa have engaged with each other and how they perceive themselves as different from one another. This has led to the apparent collaboration between Yoruba and Hausa against the Igbo during elections, highlighting the inclusionary and exclusionary processes that underlie Nigerian politics.. To understand how historical ethnic dichotomies are formed, leading to one ethnic group perceiving itself as different from and superior to another ethnic group, a theoretical framework that extends the boundaries of our understanding and interactions with ethnic groups perceived as different and minoritised is required. Therefore, for our present purposes, we draw on the theoretical notion of Othering.

The notion of othering that this paper draws on is a discursive process that seems prevalent in intercultural contexts and serves to name those thought to be different from oneself (Weis, 1995), often by assigning certain attributes. The ascription of attributes underscores the categorisation frames by which the identity of groups is constructed either positively or negatively, usually through discourse. Thus, discourse functions as a medium for the ‘expression and formation of social representations of ingroup and outgroup’ (van Dijk, 2000, p. 100), leading to group polarisation. The celebration of ingroups and the denigration of outgroups are a corollary of ethnicised discourse that sets the scene for othering. Studies have shown that culture and race, sexual orientation and gender (e.g., Weis, 1995), among others, have become increasingly fertile avenues through which othering has been instrumentalised, leading, of course, to marginalisation and isochronous social inequality in which the individual

or group constructed as Other is made to feel left out and disregarded. This categorisation entails a clear classification of the Other as a socially stigmatised and excluded category, which is talked into being through discourse, and built along, for example, an ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘superior’ versus ‘inferior’, or ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ dichotomy (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 1988). Within such binary categorisations, the assertion of Otherness is often aided by stereotypical constructions. Consequently, this Otherness leads to positive self-presentation and negative Other-presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and the group that is ‘othered’ is ‘defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination’ (Staszak, 2008, p. 1). As Staszak (2008) notes, this discursive devaluation of the particularity of Others allows the dominant group to impose its own peculiar values or identity, thereby making Otherness a recognisable phenomenon that is imposed rather than something we come to have.

Confining others into a degraded category functions *a posteriori* as a reason for their stigmatisation, which threatens their general wellbeing but at the same time asserts the superiority of the dominant group. The discursive polarisation that comes into being through discourses that construct the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy tends to conform to specific ideologies. Concerning ideology and its role in creating dichotomous groups in society, van Dijk (1988, p. 267) proposes the ‘ideological square’ as a framework to uncover how positive ingroup and negative outgroup are discursively (re)produced in discourse, and it entails emphasising information that is positive about Us; emphasising information that is negative about Them; de-emphasising information that is positive about Them; and de-emphasising information that is negative about Us. This is achieved through a range of discursive strategies, including assigning/obscuring agency, blame, and responsibility for particular actions (van Dijk, 1988) and employing the language of threat, negative frames, and voice suppression (Grove & Zwi, 2006). The discourses that embed these discursive strategies portray the dominant group positively but portray the non-dominant group negatively, often using

derogatory language and incendiary remarks. The othering that emerges from such discourses is found in our analysis of the Facebook comments analysed in this study. Therefore, drawing on the insights above, the present study aims to examine how ethnicisation and the systematic othering of ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria are accounted for in the electoral discourses of the Nigerian public on social media.

## **The study**

### ***Data***

The data for this study consist of 7678 Facebook comments downloaded from the official Facebook pages of four national dailies and two political leaders, namely Vanguardngr, Punch newspaper, Nigerian Tribune, Legitng News, Jide Sanwoolu (Lagos State governor), and Bayo Onanuga (Spokesperson to APC presidential candidate). The comments selected are exclusively from posts about Nigeria's 2023 general elections, specifically, the presidential and Lagos state gubernatorial elections. We collected comments from posts between 22 February 2023 (pre-election), and 20 March 2023 (post-election). The choice for the selected national dailies was based on their wider and detribalised readership, physical and online. The political leaders were selected based on their constant online presence with personal undertones. The reason for selecting Facebook instead of other social networking sites used by Nigerians is that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Nigeria after WhatsApp (a messaging app) (Statista, 2023). Besides, the active users of Facebook in Nigeria cut across different social classes and ages and not only 'enlightened and self-conscious people', as BBC News Africa described Twitter. The data were scrapped using [www.exportcomments.com](http://www.exportcomments.com) and saved into Excel files. During the scrapping, we included nested comments.

### ***Analytical procedure***

The analytical procedure followed a three-stage process of identification, interpretation and explanation (Fairclough, 1992). Identifying the language of exclusion and majoritisation used by netizens to construct the Other was done by closely reading their Facebook comments on Nigeria's elections. This included drawing on information from the existing literature, the dictionary, and contextual meaning to determine whether a word's, symbol's, or expression's usage is alienating or othering. This led to the creation of lexical categories directly from how they were used in the texts. Two independent CDA analysts with experience in lexical semantics and multimodality were then asked to assess the semantic and multimodal meanings of words and symbols of interest. This was followed by a discussion to sort out any contradictions in terms of the discourse/thematic meanings assigned before proceeding with the interpretation. The lexical categories and symbols were categorised according to the specific ideas of othering they elicited. This categorisation enabled the association of common themes based on the specific realities of ethnic othering they represented (Wodak et al., 2009). Finally, the themes of othering were interpreted by drawing upon the socio-historical context, including the circumstances surrounding the comments, Nigeria's history, and the available background information on the ethnic groups. Possible implications of ethnic polarisation in the comments were offered, highlighting certain linguistic mechanisms, argumentations and discursive strategies that contribute to the marginalisation and inferiorisation of ethnic minorities to perpetuate intercultural conflict, ethnic discrimination and prejudice. Ultimately, a discussion of the importance of intercultural competence in easing ethnic tension and engendering intercultural competence is presented.

## **Analysis**

### ***Stereotyping the ethnic Other***

Several Facebook posts, particularly by some Yoruba people, stereotype individuals from the Igbo ethnolinguistic group because of their different political choices, as shown in Extract 1.



*Extract 1*

1. Tell dem o, *awon chukwudi* (Chukwudi's people), only fools claiming Lagos is no man's land as if Lagos is in South South or south east. They have forgotten if they don't get to Lagos, they won't make it. *Awon ole* (thieves), Evans family.
2. This is Yoruba land, land of God, Igbos are from the zoo biafra land, we Yoruba are not Animal's
3. We are Yoruba, we will defend our land from the invaders from the east.
4. The key investments in Lagos are from Hausas and Yorubas and foreigners. Igbos are only good at selling jeans, phone accessories, spare parts and other import-based businesses. It behoves on Lagos Assembly to come up with subtle legislation to curtail the political excesses of igbos in Lagos.

These posts are comments on Nigerian Tribune's Facebook post reporting a statement, 'Hope the 'Obidiots' believe now that Lagos belongs to Yorubas', by Musiliu Akinsanya (popularly known as MC Oluomo), the Chairman of the Lagos State Parks Management Committee, a day after the governorship elections in Lagos State. 'Obidiots' is a pejoration of 'Obidients', the name of the supporters of the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (Peter Obi). These comments contain a strong ethnocentric and stereotypical language that demeans and devalues the Igbo people and reflects the discourse of ethnic politics in Nigeria. In (1), the poster uses 'awon Chukwudi' (a name used by the Yoruba to refer to the Igbo people) as a derogatory nomination strategy to explicitly mention the ethnic group he evaluates. 'Obidients' are Nigerians from different ethnic groups, including Yoruba, who demand positive change in government. Isolating the Igbo ethnic group, probably because it is the ethnic group of the Labour Party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi, could be interpreted as a strategy to create a narrative that the Igbo people are the real enemy and threat. The use of derogatory terms such

as ‘fools’, ‘awon ole’ (thieves in the Yoruba language), and referential strategy ‘Evans family’ (referring to the notorious kidnapping gang leader, Chukwudumeme Onwuamadike, also known as Evans) to attack and stereotype the Igbo people aims at discrediting those who have claimed that Lagos belongs to no one. This representation echoes previous research on stereotypes that perceived minority groups as associated with pejorative terms aimed at delegitimizing their existence and undermining their contributions to society (Banda & Mawadza, 2015).

By stating that the Igbo people are unsuccessful outside Lagos (1), the poster implies that they are dependent and cannot thrive without the support of Lagos or the Yoruba people. This hyperbolic expression of ethnocentrism reveals a troubling trend in Nigerian politics, where ethnic identities are weaponised to gain political power and marginalise others based on their ethnic group. Example (2) contains a similar derogatory language and reinforces Igbo ethnic stereotyping by referring to them as ‘animals’ and those who come from ‘the zoo Biafra land,’ implying that they are uncivilised and inferior. The use of ‘we Yoruba are not Animal’s’ (2) exemplifies Ladegaard’s (2012) position that when talking about the Other, individuals rely on what they are not to stereotype the outgroup. This membership categorisation of the Igbo people dehumanises and perpetuates negative stereotypes about them. It positions the Igbo people as inferior and not deserving equal treatment and respect. In (3), the poster constructs a Yoruba identity superior to the Igbo people by portraying them as ‘invaders from the east.’ This discursive construction of ethnic boundaries and divisions depicts an ‘us’ (the Yoruba people) versus ‘them’ (the Igbo people) binary thinking and justifies the exclusionary attitudes towards the Igbo people. The explicit labelling of the Igbo as ‘invaders from the east’ can be taken as an inflammatory language that portrays the Igbo as harmful raiders, criminals, and highly violent people who have no respect for borders.

Such stereotypical descriptions underscore how dominant ingroups in a multiethnic context shore up territorial borders through highly charged territorialised discourses to create hegemony, stigmatise the Other, and discriminate against the outgroup. The category pair ‘defend’ and ‘invaders’ in (3) serves a two-fold purpose of presenting the Yoruba as morally superior and owners of Lagos while constructing the Igbo as undesirable and aliens. Such representation portrays them as ‘folk devils’ whose behaviour must be neutralised to restore normalcy in Yoruba land (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This finding is echoed in research on the discursive construction of Fulani nomads in Ghana, who are represented as aliens and threats irrespective of how many years they have lived in and contributed to the economy of the community (Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021). This polarised structure is intensified by the use of ‘our land’, which implies that the Igbo people do not have any legitimate claim to Lagos, and their presence in the city is seen as an intrusion. This polarisation is heightened via a reductionism mechanism, ‘Igbos are only good in selling jeans, phone accessories, spare parts and other import based businesses’ (4), which presents the Igbo people as those whose commercial activities do not contribute to the growth of Lagos in more substantial ways.

In addition to the stigmatisation and alienation of the Igbo people, Yoruba political actors whose mothers are of Igbo descent and belong to an opposition party are also stereotyped and delegitimised, as exemplified in the following posts in Extract 2.

*Extract 2*

5. We’re rejecting him [Gbadebo] and his IPOB mentality on 11th of March. *Sanwo Olu Lekan si* (Sanwo Olu once again)
6. Lagos is a Yoruba land so chinedu can never be Governor here

7. Your Gbadebo is a bastard, R Vivour did not accept him, the reason he was raised in Ibo land, an IPOB that assisted in destroying Lagos state during End SARs. God will not allow our enemy over any Yoruba land in Jesus name.
8. Na *omo* Igbo una wan put as Lagos Governor? *Kolework* 🇳🇮🇳🇮 (Is it an Igbo person you want to elect as Lagos Governor? It will not work)

The examples in Extract 2 question the real Yoruba identity of Gbadebo Vivour, the Lagos State governorship candidate of the Labour Party, owing to his maternal Igbo ancestry. Although he is not the only contestant whose mother is Igbo because he is of the opposition party, his Igbo affiliation was deployed as a strategy to delegitimise his candidacy (Ajetunmobi, 2023). The delegitimation based on ethnic affiliation is expressed by derogatory language such as ‘IPOB mentality’, ‘bastard’, and ‘omo Igbo’, suggesting that Gbadebo is an Igbo conspirator sent to oust Yoruba people out of their land. This conspiratorial thinking reinforces and perpetuates the discourse of suspicion and mistrust. This ethnic-based stereotyping reflects the effects of colonialism in Nigeria, which have heightened ethnic divisions and perpetuated the dominance of one ethnic group over the other in political domains.

By referring to Gbadebo with his Igbo name, Chinedu (6), and stating that his Yoruba father did not accept him (7), the posters construct Gbadebo as illegitimate and a negative Other. This exclusionary attitude reinforces ethnic boundaries and shows how far individuals can deprive people of their rights because of ethnic-based politics. From an intercultural perspective, these examples demonise inter-ethnic marriages, disrespect cultural diversity and perpetuate negative stereotypes about anyone with an Igbo identity. The appeal to religion in (7) realised by the expression ‘God will not allow our enemy over any Yoruba land in Jesus name’ is also instructive. We interpret this religious invocation as a justification for the exclusionary attitudes and stereotypes of the Igbo people. By using this religious mechanism, the poster implies that

their actions are godly and that the Yoruba people have a divine right to control and defend their land (Aboh, 2023). This ‘enemification’ intensifies the force of the claims made about Gbadebo and the Igbo people that only the Yoruba people have the legitimate right to dominate Yoruba land and that any attempt by anyone with Igbo descent to challenge this right is a threat. Constructing the Igbo as a threat can fuel violence towards them, which can potentially lead to their alienation. We argue that discourses of alienation create spatial marginalisation, ethnic polarisation, political discrimination, and stimulate disgust for Igbo politicians irrespective of their credentials and the right to contest public office. Thus, it seems that alienating the Igbo, as the tone of (6) and (7) suggests, enables the Yoruba to deal with the threat caused by Gbadebo’s gubernatorial candidacy. Additionally, the laughing emojis in (8) are used to deride the plan of making an ‘omo Igbo’ (an Igbo person) the Governor of Lagos, implying that such a plan is a joke.

Of note in excerpts 1 and 2 and several of the Facebook posts are the codeswitching between standard English, Nigerian English and words from the Yoruba language. The codeswitching in the excerpts performs two main functions. First, the posters use it to index their identity as Yoruba. Given that language is a marker of identity, they use the Yoruba expressions to signal their membership in the Yoruba ethnolinguistic group. The use of Yoruba when referring to Gbadebo’s opposition ‘Sanwo Olu’ in (5) may also be interpreted as a way to show that while Sanwo Olu is considered Yoruba, Gbadebo is represented as Igbo with an ‘IPOB mentality’. Second, the codeswitching realises a derogatory function signalled by ‘omo Igbo’ (8). ‘Omo Igbo,’ which literally means ‘an Igbo person,’ is a derogatory expression used by Yorubas to emphasise the bad deeds of Igbo people. It is possible that the poster used such a codeswitched form given that its derogatory force is stronger than its English equivalence.

A further examination of the Facebook comments reveals that some Yoruba use stereotypes to reinforce the alienation of the Igbo by drawing the battle line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as exemplified in Extract 3:

*Extract 3*

9. It’s only a fool that will be dragging Lagos with Yorubas no matter the investment you have there, it’s better you wake up from your slumber and face reality. So because of politics now you guys don’t know your boundaries.
10. After this governorship election, we must start making a conscious effort to ease out these people, discourage them in every way from occupying Lagos. By continuing on this so-called liberal philosophy, we’re playing with fire. I now understand why the Northerners embarked on that ejection crusade of the Southeasterners from their region in the 1960s.
11. Lagos is a pride of all Yoruba land. Hence, we must put some policy in place to reduce their excessiveness in our land.

In the examples above, the use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ and ‘you’, ‘them’, ‘these’, and ‘their’ indicate the construction of opposition between ingroup and outgroup. Using pronouns in this discursive manner has been found in several studies (Aboh, 2023; Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021) across disciplines to play a vital role in constructing differences and indicating the distance between groups. While ‘you’, ‘them’, ‘these’ and ‘their’ refer to the outgroup Igbo ethnic group, ‘we’ and ‘our’ are used to refer to the ingroup Yoruba ethnic group. This configures an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomy in which designations such as ‘fools’ and ‘excessiveness’ are used in a negative Other presentation of the Igbo people. By employing the pronoun ‘you’, the Igbo are hierarchised and confined to the periphery within a spatial organisation with clear ‘boundaries’ that must not be trespassed (9). By their position in this

hierarchy, the Igbo are denied a place in Lagos despite the ‘investment’ (9) they have made in the land, hence a call for the Igbo to ‘wake up from your slumber and face reality’ (9). Such comments intensify the discrimination, isolation, exclusion, and inferiorisation of the Igbo.

Further, the othering of the Igbo, aided by using the lexicon ‘fire’ (10), draws on a metaphorical conceptualisation that suggests that the Igbo are a danger and threat to society and should, therefore, be consciously extinguished by evicting them from Lagos. The meaning of this metaphorical allusion is strengthened by the statement, ‘Northerners embarked on that ejection crusade of the Southeasterners’ (10), which draws on a historicisation strategy (see Ganaah et al., 2023) that exploits historical memory to justify the performance of a present action. The negative connotation of the metaphor here resonates with previous studies (Banda & Mawadza, 2015) that found that negative metaphors tend to be used to represent minority groups to make them appear undesirable and a group to be feared. Although the Igbo are constructed as a threat, the use of ‘we’ in (10) suggests that Yorubas still have superiority in terms of agency and can exercise it to quench the ‘fire’ of the Igbo. This agency is further highlighted by verbal constructions such as ‘to ease out’, ‘come together’, ‘take the ownership’, ‘put some policy’, and ‘reduce their excessiveness’ that indicate intentionality. These verb phrases not only point to specific, actionable efforts Yorubas ‘must start making’ (10) to take proprietary rights over ‘our land’ (11) but also underscore the authority they wield to do so. Thus, using the noun ‘policy’ can be interpreted as the commentator’s assertion of the political supremacy the Yorubas possess to introduce rules that will silence, alienate and marginalise the Igbo. Such an interpretation mirrors the ethnicisation of politics in Nigeria, which manifests in the use of ethnicised discourses to appeal to specific cultural communities with the promise of serving their parochial tribal interests, often at the expense of other ethnicities.

### *Perpetuating ethnic othering through historicising ethnic politics*

Ethnic othering is perpetuated or achieved through historicisation. This is a conscious appeal to history to legitimise an action or create a condition for the existence of the Other. And by historicising, Fullmer (2001, n.p.) states that it is examining a discourse 'social environment in history and speculate how this environment may have shaped the discourse'. Discourses are historical and such intertextuality is recognised; however, what we interrogate as a way of othering is the exaltation of the receding past for self-interpretation of the present. In the electoral discourse, several posters use historical narratives to justify ethnic prejudices and exclusionary attitudes towards other ethnic groups as illustrated in Extract 4.

#### *Extract 4*

12. The ridiculous origin of Gbadebo is similar to the origin of those listed in my comment above and of many who call themselves Lagosians including the Royal House of Lagos as declared by Oba Akiolu himself sometime ago to the shock of the Yoruba people. Till today, the Lagos Islanders like papa Okunnu, Oba of Lagos and Chiefs declare that they are not part of the proposed Yoruba Nation.

The comment in (12) suggests that the Igbo are strangers who have no claim to Lagos or other Yoruba lands despite their long-standing presence and contributions to the economic and cultural life of these regions. This kind of ethnic chauvinism not only ignores the historical realities of migration, intermarriage, and cultural exchange but also reinforces stereotypes and prejudices that can fuel violence and conflict. In (12), historicisation is utilised to perpetuate ethnic othering in two patterns. Firstly, creating an othered political candidate through questioning the politician's historical origin. In the race for the governorship position in Lagos state, the historical origin of the key opposition candidate, Gbadebo, who was the flagbearer of the Labour party with a large support base from the youths and non-indigenes (mainly the



Igbo), is deliberately positioned as ‘ridiculous’, consequently, illegitimate. The poster affirms that Gbadebo, just like Oba Akiolu, is not a true Lagosian by virtue of his birthplace, which was not of the original Yoruba land. The discursive position places Gbadebo whose ancestry, birth, and naturalisation make him a core Lagos indigene as non-indigene like most of his supporters, implying that he has no legitimate right to govern the state.

Another pattern through which historicisation is used to perpetuate ethnic othering is by what Boyce and Chunnu (2019) call ‘fear framing’. Fear is discursively spread in order to reinforce: (i) the fear of the Other and (ii) the fear into the Other. Boyce and Chunnu (2019) argue that despite their small numbers, the presence of minority groups in intergroup contexts can cause fear among the majority group based on how the majority group perceives the minority group. In other words, the presence of the minority non-indigenes, who are the Other, is inimical to the survival of the majority indigenes, so the minority non-indigenes should be feared. In addition, the Other who are non-indigenes are endangered for their presence in a foreign land; hence, they should be afraid. In Extract 5, we see how the posters evoke fear for and in the Other by maximising historical antecedents.

#### *Extract 5*

13. I’m still confused if this is the same Bayo Onanuga we read with relish at TheNews and Concord of those days.... The ethnic profiling you (Onanuga) push will neither help Yoruba nor the Igbo nor Nigeria.
14. This is an eye opener for all the igbos to leave Lagos before it’s fully started. Not only Lagos, but all the Yoruba lands. Let what happened between Ghana and Nigeria comes quickly
15. I feel like rain a big curse on dem, I was born at Isale Eko, both my primary and secondary school are all at Lagos island, so where did they now heard story that Lagos

is a no man's land, yoruba should not trust dis people again, I think we should learn something from dis past election, we love dem, but they really hate us, our landlord and all lagosians must learn from dis, they have another plan for us, our chief and obas should not sleep o...

In (13), the poster draws on the history of the social actor and the danger of his position on the state of the Igbo in Lagos. The lexical choices: 'ethnic profiling' and 'harm' suggest that the poster is fearful that promoting ethnic profiling will lead to harm and undermine the cohesion existing between the Igbo who live in Lagos and the Yorubas. The key lexical choices of (14), 'eye opener', 'leave', and 'fully started,' suggest that the poster is fearful that the situation in Lagos will become more dangerous for the Igbo and is urging them to leave before it is too late. This poster also draws on the history of 'ghana must go', an event that saw the deportation of West African migrants, especially Ghanaians from Nigeria, following a January 1983 executive order from President Shehu Shagari. Such a historical reference is meant to *put* fear in the Igbo who live in Lagos. The fear is legitimised on the grounds that the Igbo are unwanted.

The poster in (15) refers to his birth and naturalisation as valid historical points to frame 'the dangerous Other'. The lexical choices: 'should not trust', 'hate', and 'should not sleep' suggest that the poster is fearful of the Igbo and sees them as a threat to Yoruba dominance in Lagos. The posters appropriate historical accounts to justify the exclusion of other ethnic groups from political power in Lagos. For the poster, outsiders do not have the right to contest for political power in Lagos state. More so, (15) takes it a step further by implying that an Igbo governor would not be allowed to rule Lagos because Yoruba politicians dominate the state. This statement ignores the fact that Nigeria is a democratic state, and that people should be allowed to elect whomever they choose as their leaders, regardless of ethnicity. Moreover, some comments in the excerpts suggest that ethnic politics are driven by narrow, partisan interests rather than genuine concern for the common good. This critique highlights the need

for political leaders and citizens to focus on governance, development, and social justice issues rather than on ethnic or religious identity politics.

The historicisation of ethnic politics to create and perpetuate ethnic othering engenders three discourse problems. First, it reinforces stereotypes and prejudices that can fuel violence and conflict. When people are told that other ethnic groups are outsiders who have no right to participate in political or social life, it creates a sense of division and animosity that can lead to violence and conflict. Second, it ignores the complex and diverse historical and cultural heritage of a country. Countries such as Nigeria comprise multiple ethnic groups with unique histories and cultures. When one group's history is elevated above all others, it erases the contributions and experiences of other groups and reinforces the idea that only one group is truly 'belonging' to the country. Third, it perpetuates inequality and discrimination. When certain ethnic groups are excluded from political or social life based on their ethnicity, it creates a system of inequality and discrimination that can have long-lasting effects on those groups.

### **The need for intercultural competence**

As mentioned earlier, Nigeria is multiethnic; as such, it is a contested place. And for varied reasons, political opportunities are unequally distributed. Ethnic groups and individuals therein attempt to negotiate their interests. The negotiation process has become fraught with interethnic tensions that contribute to the marginalisation of certain groups. The perpetuity of the ethnic othering realised using various discursive strategies analysed and discussed above is evidence of deeply-stringed inter-tribal conflict and polarisation. And importantly, it shows a lack of intercultural competence. We propose that one way of reducing ethnic othering is by engendering intercultural competence among Nigerian citizens. Intercultural competence could be seen as 'as recognition of a new set of competences that is required in order for people to speak and act appropriately in a globalised world' (Ladegaard, 2024). Such effective interaction does not exclude potential conflict, but it entails accomplishing negotiations across

cultures based on respectful and favourable culture-specific and culture-general features (Guilherme et al., 2009). Intercultural competence is vital in an inter-ethnic conflicted society because it can help promote understanding, reduce prejudice, and facilitate effective communication between different cultural groups. In Nigeria, where there is a history of ethnic conflict and tension, there may be a lack of understanding and empathy among different cultural groups, which can lead to othering, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Therefore, by promoting awareness of intercultural competence, individuals can better understand other groups' cultural norms, values, and practices. This awareness can help reduce stereotypes and promote empathy as individuals learn to appreciate and respect the differences between themselves and others. In addition, intercultural competence can help promote social justice and equity, as it can help to identify and address systemic issues that contribute to ethnic conflict and inequality. Towards describing and theorising intercultural competence, most of the scholarship on interculturality (Barrett, 2016; Byram et al., 2001) have been dominated by Eurocentric and Anglo-American ideologies (Ladegaard, 2024). While these ideas may be applicable, in other contexts, their universality is both problematic and questionable as they ignore, for example, non-Western contexts with peculiar but equally valid cultural norms that mediate intercultural competence. Our study gestures towards de-problematising the geographically skewed nature of most of the existing intercultural competence models. Given the relatively significantly less attention the African context has received in intercultural competence research, our study, while acknowledging that some of the existing intercultural competence models such as respect for diversity, awareness of cultural differences, show of empathy, open-mindedness and communication and dialogue might be helpful in deconstructing ethnic othering in Nigeria, takes a critical look at the historical and cultural dynamics of Africa in general and Nigeria more specifically, and additionally proposes the following strategies to promote intercultural competence.

1. Interdependence: This involves acknowledging the difference between groups but at the same time placing value on each group in terms of the contribution each group makes to Nigerian society, without which collective survival and unity would be impossible to achieve. Interdependence at the cultural and economic level can minimise ethnic superiority and tensions because at the heart of it is cooperation and dependability which are necessary for intercultural relations. This view echoes Irom's (2012) observation that among the precolonial ethnic communities that make up present day Nigeria, the need to exchange goods and services with each other for the purpose of maintaining collective subsistence, for example, was perceived as an important driver of intercultural relations and interethnic harmony, leading to more inclusive behaviour in the contact and interaction between people of different ethnic origins. Similarly, through cultural interdependence, although there may be differences in cultural orientation, beliefs, values, and practices, individuals can develop a more nuanced understanding of intercultural relations (Ribeiro, 2016) since the cultural differences that exist are not inherently good or bad. Historically, meaningful cultural exchanges through learning formed part of the ontological and epistemological beliefs of most Nigerian ethnicities. For example, the Igbo saying '*Ikwu amaghị ibe ezi ya*' (We learn from others), underscores the value in the Other as a source of wisdom and knowledge that can help Us. This has the potential to foster cooperation among the different ethnic groups and promote the perfection of knowledge and skills. By cooperation, we mean the coming together of different ethnic groups, acknowledging the value of learning from one another and engaging in joint efforts that would lead to national development. Thus, through economic and cultural interdependence, a deep intercultural awareness can help to decentre dominant ethnic groups.

2. Education: As echoed by Ladegaard (2024), education remains a widely accepted means of dealing with otherness behaviours, such as ethnic cleansing and xenophobia, as well as promoting interculturally competent behaviours that are non-ethnocentric, multilingual, and multicultural. However, attempts at universalising education may not yield the best outcomes of intercultural competence across the board because, currently, education remains Western-dominated. We propose that an education model that incorporates African ontology will have more useful implications for the Nigerian context than the more Western-driven forms of education that appear to reinforce colonialism and are increasingly less appropriate in postcolonial Africa. What is widely believed to be the African ontology dictates that every being is a being onto others which implies that interaction is essential to our existence because there is no being that exists in isolation (Ekeh, 2020). This ontology accommodates the African concept of communitarianism, also known as *Ubuntu* (see Tomaselli, 2016), which emphasises human interconnectedness. We suggest that, from the basic level throughout the entire education spectrum, the school curriculum should give prominence to the African ontological values and communitarian ideas that characterised the historically peaceful and harmonious co-existence between different ethnic societies such as the existential practices of cooperation and interdependence and the sanctity of human life which significantly prevented ethnic othering then. This will promote an early onset of intercultural competence which can be systematically sustained throughout the educational cycle.

## Conclusion

This study drew on CDA to examine ethnic othering on social media during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The analysis revealed that ethnic groups considered minorities and aliens are stereotyped, threatened and discredited. This alienation is realised through the discourse of territorialisation and historicisation of ethnic politics. The analysis also showed that through the polarisation of 'us' versus 'them', the Igbo are hierarchicalised and confined to the periphery within a spatial organisation with clear boundaries that must not be trespassed. Online othering of ethnic groups not only delegitimises their identity as Nigerians but also disenfranchises and dehumanises them. This study highlighted the need for intercultural competence to help reduce the myriad of problems caused by harmful negative stereotypes against the Other. Intercultural competence is crucial because, as Barrett (2016, p. iii) reminds us, there is a need to empower the:

needs and rights of all human beings; [...] a willingness to speak out against expressions of prejudice and intolerance; a willingness to defend those who are disempowered and disadvantaged; and a willingness to take civic or political action for the greater good if this is required.

Engaging in such an awareness enterprise represents a form of social advocacy recommended in the literature which encourages researchers to conduct research not only on participants but *also for* and *with* them (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020). Online ethnic othering does not exist in a vacuum but taps into the history and context of power dynamics, social inequalities, and existing societal prejudices. It has been argued that the current ethnic and multicultural problems bedevilling Nigeria today are a few of the aftermaths of the colonial amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates (Agbedo, 2019). However, if the 'One Nigeria' campaign (that is, the unity of Nigeria as one country) is to be maintained, Nigerians need to eschew ethnic-based politics and desist from seeing ethnic differences as a deficit. The

Nigerian government also has a huge role in curbing ethnic othering by ensuring an equitable distribution of resources. This equity in resource allocation has the potential to promote a sense of belonging among different ethnic groups, which may spur them to contribute to the development of Nigeria as a country. Additionally, ensuring that there is no monopoly of power by a particular ethnic group would be a great way of minimising ethnic othering in Nigeria (Ndiribe & Aboh, 2022).

Although free speech is one of the principles of democratic nations such as Nigeria, the Nigerian government needs to sanction individuals or groups whose language use (potentially) causes harm to another. It is imperative that this sanction be implemented fairly and equitably. The government's selective prosecution of harmful online speech by people from particular ethnic groups and sparing others needs to be addressed, as it appears to be one of the factors maintaining online ethnic othering (Alaribe, 2023). This study contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on the othering and marginalisation of less powerful groups, especially in the African context. Future studies should explore how less powerful and stereotyped groups resist othering and discrimination on social media.

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