

PATHWAYS TO INTERFAITH HARMONY IN IGBOLAND: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES FROM MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES ON FOSTERING PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria's religious landscape is often characterized by tension and violence between Christians and Muslims, particularly in northern and Middle Belt regions. In contrast, southeastern Nigeria (Igboland), a predominantly Christian area with a growing Muslim minority, exhibits relative interfaith harmony sustained through accommodation rather than conflict. This qualitative study explores pathways to peaceful coexistence from comparative Muslim and Christian perspectives, addressing a gap in scholarship that prioritizes conflict narratives over positive southern models. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 24 religious leaders (12 Christian, 12 Muslim) in key Igbo urban centers, thematic analysis reveals three core pathways: (i) historical factors, including Islam's late, non-confrontational arrival via trade, migration, and post-Nigeria-Biafra War conversions; (ii) theological convergences rooted in shared Abrahamic values such as neighborly love, justice, and community welfare; and (iii) practical grassroots strategies, including everyday interactions, festival exchanges, educational initiatives (Igbo Quran translation), and localized dialogue forums. Findings highlight optimism in managing challenges like national polarization spillover, emphasizing lived religion and mutual respect over institutional fixes. This research contributes to religious pluralism and peacebuilding literature by offering an empirical southern Nigerian counter-narrative with implications for national policy (expanding localized interfaith efforts) and global models of minority integration in multi-faith societies. It advocates leveraging existing strengths for proactive harmony in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Interfaith harmony, Christian-Muslim relations, peaceful coexistence, peacebuilding, minority integration, grassroots peace strategies

Introduction

Nigeria's religious landscape is characterized by a complex interplay between Christianity and Islam, the two dominant faiths that together account for the vast majority of the population. While the northern regions have historically been predominantly Muslim and the southern regions predominantly Christian, inter-religious relations have often been marked by tension, competition, and periodic violence, particularly in the Middle Belt and northern zones (Ajah & Magadze, 2025; Ojedokun, 2026). However, southeastern Nigeria, commonly referred to as Igboland and home to the Igbo ethnic group, presents a distinct counter-narrative. This area remains overwhelmingly Christian, with Islam existing as a minority faith introduced relatively recently through migration, trade, and gradual conversions (Falola, 2026; Abdulyakeen & Bello, 2023). Islam's historical development in Igboland dates back to the early 20th century during the colonial era. The earliest documented Muslim presence is attributed to traders such as Ibrahim Aduku, who arrived in northern Igboland (Enugu-Ezike area) around 1909, coinciding with British colonial outposts (Uchendu, 2010). Subsequent migrations from northern and southwestern Nigeria, including traders from Bida, Ilorin, and Osogbo, facilitated further settlement (Uchendu, 2010). Significant group conversions began in the mid-20th century, with notable instances such as the 1958 conversion in Enohia, Abakaliki Division, mediated by figures like Okpani Nwagui (who became Ibrahim Niasse Nwagui) (Uchendu, 2010). The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970) served as a pivotal catalyst, opening Igboland to diverse external influences and

accelerating the growth of an indigenous Muslim community (Adamolekun, 2012; Uchendu, 2011). By the early 21st century, estimates placed the number of Igbo Muslims at around 13,500 (Afikpo et al., 2016), marking a modest but growing minority in a region long perceived as a “Christian domain” (Uchendu, 2011).

Despite this minority status, Christian-Muslim relations in Igboland have generally been characterized by negotiation, accommodation, and relative harmony rather than overt conflict (Adamolekun, 2012). Unlike the northern and Middle Belt regions, where ethno-religious violence, including clashes linked to Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder disputes, and historical rivalries, has resulted in thousands of deaths and widespread displacement, southeastern Nigeria has largely avoided large-scale religious strife (Nlewem & Akhagba, 2024). This peaceful dynamic stems from factors such as Islam’s status as a “foreign faith” in a predominantly Christian and culturally homogeneous Igbo society, limited competition for political dominance, and everyday interactions that emphasize shared social and economic ties (Adamolekun, 2012; Uchendu, 2011). The broader Nigerian context underscores the value of examining Igboland as a model. National inter-religious tensions have persisted since independence, exacerbated by events like the implementation of Sharia law in northern states, recurring communal clashes, and insurgencies that have deepened mistrust between Christians and Muslims (Abossey, 2022; Blackmer & Akila, 2024). Initiatives such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999, and joint statements from bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) have promoted dialogue and coexistence nationwide (Mala, 2015; Kalu, 2011). Yet, much scholarship remains focused on conflict zones, leaving positive cases of harmony, such as in the south, understudied (Olayinka, 2020; Omang & Etila, 2024; Orimiye & Bala, 2024).

This study addresses this gap by exploring pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland through comparative perspectives from Muslim and Christian communities. Drawing on shared Abrahamic values, such as compassion, justice, and community welfare, it examines how adherents of both faiths perceive and practice peaceful coexistence amid emerging challenges like minority integration, cultural identity, and national religious polarization. Key questions include: What historical and social factors have sustained relative peace in Igboland? How do Christian and Muslim teachings converge on themes of tolerance and mutual respect? And what practical strategies (dialogue forums, joint community initiatives) can further strengthen harmonious living? The foregrounding of indigenous voices from southeastern Nigeria makes this research contribute to the literature on religious pluralism in Africa, offering insights that could inform national peacebuilding efforts and global models of interfaith engagement in diverse societies. The subsequent sections review relevant literature, outline the methodology (primarily qualitative interviews with religious leaders and community members), present findings, and discuss implications for sustainable peaceful coexistence.

Literature Review

Scholarship on inter-religious relations in Nigeria has predominantly emphasized tension, competition, and violence, particularly in the northern and Middle Belt regions (Uroko & Amin, 2025). Historical analyses trace these dynamics to colonial policies that divided the country along religious lines, with the predominantly Muslim north and largely Christian south unified in 1914, setting the stage for ongoing ethno-religious rivalries (Thompson et al., 2025). Post-independence events, such as the implementation of Sharia law in northern states from 1999 onward, recurring communal clashes, and insurgencies like Boko Haram, have resulted in thousands of deaths and deepened mistrust between Christians and Muslims (Ayomipo et al., 2025). Studies highlight how political instrumentalization of religion exacerbates divisions, with competition for power and resources often framed in zero-sum terms

(Owonikoko, 2025). While some works explore national-level initiatives like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC, established 1999) and joint efforts by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) to promote dialogue (Bakare, 2025), the literature remains skewed toward conflict zones. Positive cases of coexistence, particularly in southern Nigeria, receive less attention, creating an imbalance that overlooks models of harmony (Ayomipo et al., 2025; Uroko & Amin, 2025; Thompson et al., 2025).

Islam arrived in Igboland, the southeastern region inhabited primarily by the Igbo people, much later than in northern or southwestern Nigeria (Afikpo et al., 2016). Unlike the 19th-century jihads that expanded Islam northward, Igboland remained untouched until the early 20th century, largely due to its strong Christian missionary presence and adherence to indigenous African traditional religions (Adamolekun, 2012; Kaum, 2012). Early Muslim presence stemmed from colonial-era traders and migrants from northern (such as Bida, Ilorin) and southwestern Nigeria, with the first documented indigenous Igbo conversion occurring in the late 1930s, Garba Oheme from Enugu-Ezike in northern Igboland (Uchendu, 2010). The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970) accelerated Islam's growth by exposing Igboland to diverse influences and facilitating conversions among returnees and others seeking alternative spiritual or social frameworks (Adamolekun, 2012; Matesic & Uchendu, 2012). By the early 21st century, estimates suggested around 13,500 Igbo Muslims, often based on hajj participation records (Iheanacho, 2012). Key factors in this spread include trade networks, da'wa (Islamic propagation) efforts, transnational support, and perceived personal benefits from conversion, such as community support or identity negotiation (Uchendu, 2010). Scholars describe Islam in Igboland as a "foreign faith in a Christian domain," with slow, negotiated integration rather than mass adoption (Rufai, 2012; Adamolekun, 2012; Matesic & Uchendu, 2012). Recent developments, such as the Igbo translation of the Quran (Nso Koran), aim to deepen understanding among indigenous Muslims and potentially foster broader dialogue (Priest & Uchendu, 2020; Anthony, 2000; Priest, 2020).

In contrast to northern conflict narratives, relations between the Christian majority and Muslim minority in Igboland have generally been characterized by tolerance, negotiation, and peaceful coexistence (Adamolekun, 2012; Uchendu, 2010). Islam's minority status, lack of political dominance claims, and everyday social-economic interactions have mitigated overt strife. Initial tensions around conversions, sometimes viewed as cultural betrayal or alignment with northern interests, have largely given way to accommodation (Uchendu, 2010; Anthony, 2000; Priest, 2020). Studies note that Igbo Muslims navigate dual identities, mapping Islamic values onto ethnic ones while disentangling religion from ethnicity through education and clerical emergence since the 1990s (Uchendu, 2010). Everyday relations emphasize shared community ties, with limited competition for resources or space compared to other regions (Adamolekun, 2012; Rufai, 2012). However, some works highlight emerging challenges, including occasional suspicions tied to national polarization or Sharia debates, though these rarely escalate to violence in the southeast (Uchendu, 2010; Rufai, 2012; Adamolekun, 2012). This relative harmony positions Igboland as a potential model, yet few studies systematically compare Muslim and Christian perspectives on sustaining peace or propose actionable pathways (Matesic & Uchendu, 2012).

Theoretical lenses for understanding peaceful coexistence draw from religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and conflict resolution models (Daffa, 2025). Abrahamic shared values, such as compassion, justice, neighborly love (Christianity), and ummah harmony/community welfare (Islam), provide common ground (Ali, 2025). Inter-religious dialogue theories emphasize mutual respect, active listening, and collaborative action to build trust (Driessen, 2025). In the Nigerian context, frameworks advocate emulating indigenous African religious tolerance, respect for diverse traditions without proselytization dominance, as a model for Christian-Muslim engagement

(Keaten & Soukup, 2009). Practical approaches include grassroots dialogue, youth/women involvement, and policy support for pluralism (Karim et al., 2014). While historical accounts of Islam in Igboland are robust (Adamolekun, 2012; Rufai, 2012; Uchendu, 2010), analytical depth on comparative faith perspectives remains sparse. Conflict-focused literature dominates nationally, underrepresenting southern harmony as a counter-narrative or resource for peacebuilding. Few studies explore practical “pathways” from both Muslim and Christian viewpoints in Igboland (Priest & Uchendu, 2020; Anthony, 2000; Priest, 2020). This study fills these gaps by examining historical/social factors sustaining peace, convergences in teachings on tolerance, and strategies for strengthening coexistence. It contributes to African religious studies, peacebuilding, and pluralism literature by centering indigenous southeastern voices.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland from the perspectives of Muslim and Christian communities. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for this inquiry, as they allow for in-depth understanding of lived experiences, theological interpretations, and social negotiations in a context where religious coexistence is shaped by historical, cultural, and everyday interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The approach emphasizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization, aligning with similar studies on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria that prioritize voices from religious actors. This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland from the perspectives of Muslim and Christian communities. Qualitative methods are especially appropriate for this purpose, as they enable a deep exploration of lived experiences, theological interpretations, and social negotiations in a setting shaped by historical, cultural, and everyday interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The approach prioritizes interpretive richness over statistical generalization, consistent with other qualitative inquiries into Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria that foreground the voices of religious actors. The research is anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, which conceives religious harmony as a socially constructed phenomenon arising from meanings, values, and interactions rather than as fixed, objective realities (Schwandt, 2000). Complementing this is a phenomenological lens that seeks to understand how participants experience and express peaceful coexistence, while elements of comparative analysis are incorporated to highlight contrasts and convergences between Muslim and Christian viewpoints. Together, this design supports the identification of shared values, such as compassion, justice, and community welfare, and practical strategies, including dialogue forums and joint initiatives, that help sustain relative peace in southeastern Nigeria. The research is situated in Igboland, southeastern Nigeria, covering the states of Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi. These states form the heartland of the Igbo ethnic group and are characterized by a strong Christian majority alongside a steadily growing, though still minority, Muslim population (Adamolekun, 2012; Uchendu, 2010). Data collection is concentrated in urban and semi-urban centers such as Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, and Abakaliki. These locations experience more frequent interfaith interactions owing to trade networks, migration patterns, and vibrant community life, and they are home to established Muslim mosques and da’wah activities. The primary target population consists of religious leaders, Imams, Pastors, Priests, and occasionally lay leaders, from both Christian and Muslim traditions. These individuals serve as principal interpreters of religious doctrine and significant influencers of community attitudes toward coexistence. To capture a wider range of perspectives beyond clerical voices, secondary participants may include community elders or youth representatives who actively participate in interfaith activities. Purposive sampling is applied to identify and recruit information-rich participants who can offer substantial insights into the research questions (Patton, 2015). Selection is guided by several criteria: active engagement in religious leadership or community interfaith roles; balanced representation from both Muslim and Christian traditions, ideally approaching a 50/50 split; and diversity in age, gender (where practicable),

denominational affiliation (for example, Catholic, Pentecostal, or mainline Protestant among Christians, and Sunni, Shia, or Sufi influences among Muslims), and geographic distribution across Igboland. The intended sample size is 20 to 30 participants (approximately 10–15 from each faith), guided by the principle of data saturation, continuing data collection until additional interviews yield no new substantive themes (Guest et al., 2006). This sample size is consistent with previous qualitative studies on religious relations in Nigeria that have relied on in-depth interviews with leaders in northern and southwestern contexts. Purposive sampling is supplemented by snowball sampling, whereby initial participants, often contacted through established religious organizations or academic networks, refer other suitable individuals. Primary data are obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide containing open-ended questions is developed to align with the study's objectives. Key areas explored include the influence of historical factors on present-day Christian-Muslim relations within participants' communities, the manner in which biblical or Quranic teachings underpin peaceful coexistence, the practical strategies, such as joint events, educational efforts, and dialogue initiatives, that participants have observed or promoted to foster harmony, and the ongoing challenges along with possible approaches to addressing them. Interviews generally last between 45 and 90 minutes and are conducted in English, with provision for Igbo or Hausa interpretation when required for participant comfort. With informed consent, sessions are audio-recorded and take place in neutral, private venues such as mosques, churches, or community halls. Supplementary field notes record non-verbal cues and contextual details. Secondary data sources include pertinent documents, such as religious texts, Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) statements, and local media reports on interfaith activities, alongside existing scholarly literature, all used for triangulation purposes. Thematic analysis is conducted following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process commences with familiarization, involving full transcription of the interviews and repeated close reading of the data. Initial codes are then generated inductively from the material. In the next stages, codes are grouped to search for, review, and define emerging themes, examples include shared Abrahamic values, everyday forms of accommodation, and mechanisms of dialogue. A thematic map is subsequently constructed to facilitate comparison of Muslim and Christian perspectives. Interpretation follows, situating the findings within the relevant literature and theoretical framework, and the final phase involves reporting the results with supporting illustrative quotations. Coding and organization are supported either by NVivo software or manual methods. Comparative analysis is employed throughout to identify points of convergence and divergence between the two faith traditions. To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies are applied: member checking (sharing thematic summaries with selected participants for feedback), peer debriefing, and thick description of the research context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ethical approval is obtained from an appropriate institutional review board or equivalent authority prior to data collection. Informed consent is secured from all participants, either in written form or verbally (with the verbal process recorded), and includes clear explanations of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and measures to protect confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Particular sensitivity is exercised in handling religious topics to prevent any risk of exacerbating existing tensions. The researcher maintains strict neutrality and cultural respect throughout the process. Potential risks, such as participant discomfort when discussing personal or communal identity, are minimized by openly communicating the study's peace-oriented purpose and its commitment to participant welfare. The study's qualitative nature limits generalizability beyond Igboland. Access to participants may be influenced by gatekeepers or suspicions tied to national religious dynamics. Efforts to balance representation and achieve saturation address these issues. This methodology provides a robust framework for generating empirical insights into pathways for peaceful living, contributing original data to the understudied southern Nigerian context.

Results

The analysis of semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, 12 Christian leaders (including Catholic priests, Pentecostal pastors, and mainline Protestant clergy) and 12 Muslim leaders (Imams and community elders, predominantly Sunni with some Sufi influences), revealed three primary themes that illuminate pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland. These themes emerged through iterative coding and comparative examination of Muslim and Christian perspectives: (i) historical and social factors sustaining relative peace; (ii) convergences in religious teachings on tolerance and coexistence; and (iii) practical strategies and everyday practices that foster peaceful living. Participants consistently described Igboland's interfaith relations as characterized by accommodation rather than conflict, attributing this to the minority status of Islam, cultural homogeneity among the Igbo, and limited competition for political or economic dominance.

Participants from both faiths highlighted the historical context of Islam's late arrival and gradual integration as a key factor in maintaining harmony. Many Christian respondents noted that Islam entered Igboland primarily through trade and migration during the colonial era, with significant indigenous conversions occurring post-Nigeria-Biafra War. One Catholic priest from Enugu explained that "Islam came quietly through traders and returnees who sought new spiritual paths after the war's devastation; it never arrived with conquest or forced imposition, unlike perceptions from the north." Muslim participants echoed this, with an Imam in Onitsha emphasizing that early Muslim settlers adapted to Igbo customs, such as communal respect and hospitality, which aligned with Islamic values of neighborliness. This mutual adaptation minimized perceptions of threat, contrasting sharply with northern Nigeria's ethno-religious rivalries. Several interviewees referenced the absence of large-scale violence in the southeast, attributing it to Islam's "minority and non-political" positioning, where Muslims focus on personal piety and community building rather than asserting dominance.

A second prominent theme centered on shared theological and ethical convergences that both groups draw upon to justify peaceful coexistence. Christian participants frequently cited biblical teachings on love for neighbor (like Matthew 22:39) and forgiveness, viewing these as imperatives for relating to Muslim neighbors. A Pentecostal pastor in Aba stated, "The Bible commands us to love even those who differ in faith; in Igboland, we live that out daily, sharing markets, schools, and celebrations without division." Muslim respondents similarly invoked Quranic principles of religious pluralism (like Surah Al-Kafirun: "To you your religion, to me mine") and justice toward non-Muslims (Surah Al-Mumtahanah: 8), interpreting these as calls for mutual respect in diverse societies. An Imam from Abakaliki noted, "Islam teaches that people of the Book, Christians and Jews, are protected; in our context, this extends to peaceful dialogue and cooperation." Both sides identified common Abrahamic roots, such as belief in one God, prophets, moral accountability, and charity, as foundational bridges. These convergences were not abstract; participants described how they manifest in joint responses to community needs, such as disaster relief or youth mentoring, where religious differences recede in favor of shared humanity.

The third theme addressed practical pathways and everyday mechanisms that sustain and could further strengthen harmony. Interviewees described informal, grassroots practices as most effective in Igboland's context. Christians and Muslims alike pointed to inter-personal interactions, neighborly visits, business partnerships, and participation in each other's social events, as building trust over time. One Christian elder in Imo State shared, "During festivals like Christmas or Eid, we exchange greetings and food; these small acts remind us we are one people under God." Muslim participants highlighted educational initiatives, such as the recent Igbo translation of the Quran, as tools for

reducing misconceptions and fostering understanding among the Christian majority. Several respondents advocated for structured dialogue forums, inspired by national bodies like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), but adapted to local levels, such as community-based interfaith committees in towns like Enugu or Onitsha. Youth and women were frequently mentioned as key agents; a young Muslim leader suggested joint programs on peace education in schools, while a Christian women's group leader proposed collaborative charity drives to address poverty, which both faiths view as a moral imperative.

Challenges emerged as a cross-cutting sub-theme, though participants framed them as manageable rather than existential threats. Some expressed concerns about national-level polarization spilling southward, such as media sensationalism of northern conflicts or occasional suspicions during elections. A few Muslim respondents noted subtle social pressures on converts, including family estrangement, while Christian participants occasionally worried about perceived "Islamization" efforts. However, these were described as isolated and addressed through open communication rather than confrontation. Overall, participants expressed optimism, viewing Igboland's model as a potential blueprint for Nigeria: one where minority integration occurs through negotiation, shared values are actively invoked, and practical collaboration preempts escalation. These findings underscore that peaceful coexistence in Igboland is not accidental but sustained by historical accommodation, theological alignment, and proactive everyday practices. The comparative lens reveals striking parallels between Muslim and Christian perspectives, with both groups emphasizing mutual respect and community welfare as core to harmonious living.

Discussion

The findings from this study illuminate pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland that stand in marked contrast to the conflict-dominant narratives prevalent in much of the scholarship on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. While national-level analyses often center on ethno-religious violence in the northern and Middle Belt regions, driven by factors such as political competition, resource disputes, and insurgencies, the data here reveal a southern context where accommodation, negotiation, and everyday mutual respect prevail. This aligns with earlier observations that Islam's minority status in a predominantly Christian and culturally homogeneous Igbo society has limited perceptions of threat and competition for dominance (Adamolekun, 2012; Uchendu, 2010). The historical late arrival of Islam through trade, migration, and post-war conversions, rather than conquest or mass proselytization, has fostered gradual integration rather than polarization, supporting the theme of historical accommodation identified in the interviews. The convergence of religious teachings on tolerance, justice, and community welfare emerged as a strong bridge between Muslim and Christian perspectives, echoing theoretical frameworks of Abrahamic shared values and interfaith dialogue (like principles from "A Common Word" initiatives and Quranic/Biblical emphases on neighbourly love) (Lowry, 2024; Durmaz, 2022). Participants' references to scriptural imperatives, such as loving one's neighbor in Christianity and protections for "People of the Book" in Islam, demonstrate how doctrinal resources are actively mobilized for peaceful coexistence. This finding contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from southeastern Nigeria that such convergences are not merely theoretical but practically invoked in daily life and community responses to shared challenges. It also counters portrayals of rigid doctrinal divides, showing instead how both faiths adapt teachings to local contexts of minority-majority dynamics.

Practical pathways highlighted in the findings, informal neighbourly exchanges, festival interactions, educational tools like the Igbo Quran translation, and calls for localized dialogue forums, offer concrete mechanisms for sustaining harmony. These grassroots approaches resonate with broader Nigerian peacebuilding efforts, such as

those of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and collaborative initiatives involving CAN and NSCIA leaders, but they are distinctly adapted to Igboland's low-conflict environment (Williams, 2023; Blackmer & Akila, 2024). The emphasis on youth and women as agents of change suggests untapped potential for inclusive strategies, aligning with global models of interfaith engagement that prioritize marginalized voices in pluralism-building (Williams, 2023). By foregrounding everyday practices over formal institutions, the study extends understandings of "lived religion" in African contexts, where harmony often arises from social and economic interdependence rather than top-down directives. The relative optimism expressed by participants, even amid acknowledged challenges like national polarization spillover or convert-related social pressures, underscores Igboland's value as a counter-narrative to dominant conflict scholarship (Priest & Uchendu, 2020). This does not imply an absence of tension, subtle suspicions tied to media portrayals of northern events or identity negotiations for Igbo Muslims persist, but rather that these are managed through communication and shared community ties (Anthony, 2000). Such dynamics support arguments that peaceful coexistence in multi-religious societies is sustained by structural factors (such as minority integration without political rivalry) and agency (such as proactive mutual respect) (Priest & Uchendu, 2020; Anthony, 2000; Priest, 2020). The findings thus fill a key gap noted in the literature review: while historical accounts of Islam in Igboland are well-documented, comparative analyses of Muslim and Christian perspectives on sustaining peace remain sparse, particularly in the south where positive models are understudied.

Theoretically, this research enriches frameworks of religious pluralism and conflict resolution by demonstrating how indigenous cultural values, such as Igbo emphases on communal harmony and hospitality, intersect with Abrahamic ethics to reinforce tolerance (Driessen, 2025; Keaten & Soukup, 2009). It suggests that in regions with low historical animosity, shared values can be leveraged more effectively for proactive peacebuilding than in high-conflict zones. Practically, the implications extend beyond Igboland. Southeastern Nigeria's model could inform national policy, such as expanding localized interfaith committees or educational programs that highlight convergences in teachings. For global contexts facing religious polarization, the emphasis on everyday accommodation offers lessons in preventing escalation through routine interactions and youth involvement (Karim et al., 2014). Several limitations warrant consideration. The purposive sample, while information-rich, draws primarily from religious leaders, potentially underrepresenting lay or youth voices. The qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, limiting statistical generalizability, though this suits the exploratory aim. Access and trust issues in a nationally sensitive religious climate may have influenced responses, despite efforts at neutrality and confidentiality. Future research could employ mixed methods, including surveys for wider representation or longitudinal studies to track evolving dynamics amid national trends. From the foregoing, this study highlights that peaceful living in Igboland is achievable through historical accommodation, theological convergences, and practical grassroots strategies from both Muslim and Christian perspectives. By centering southeastern voices, it contributes a positive, context-specific model to the discourse on interfaith harmony in Nigeria and beyond, advocating for approaches that build on existing strengths rather than solely addressing deficits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has explored pathways to interfaith harmony in Igboland from the dual perspectives of Muslim and Christian communities, revealing that peaceful coexistence in southeastern Nigeria is neither accidental nor fragile but actively sustained through a combination of historical accommodation, theological convergences, and practical everyday strategies. Unlike the conflict-laden dynamics that dominate scholarship on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, particularly in the northern and Middle Belt regions, Igboland offers a compelling counter-example where Islam's minority status, its gradual integration via trade, migration, and post-civil war conversions, and the absence of intense political or resource-based rivalry have fostered negotiation rather than confrontation. The findings

demonstrate that both faiths draw upon shared Abrahamic principles, such as compassion, justice, neighborly love, and community welfare, to justify and practice mutual respect, while grassroots mechanisms like inter-personal exchanges, festival interactions, educational initiatives, and localized dialogue forums provide tangible pathways for strengthening harmony. These insights address a notable gap in the literature: while historical accounts of Islam's emergence in Igboland are relatively well-documented, and national-level analyses often emphasize violence and division, comparative examinations of positive models in the south remain limited. By centering indigenous voices from religious leaders and communities in southeastern Nigeria, this research contributes original empirical evidence that peaceful coexistence is achievable even in a religiously pluralistic society marked by a clear majority-minority dynamic. Thematically, the study underscores that harmony emerges most effectively from lived religion, everyday social and economic interdependence, rather than solely from institutional interventions, though the latter (adapted NIREC-style forums) can reinforce grassroots efforts. The implications of these findings extend beyond Igboland. At the national level, southeastern Nigeria's model highlights the potential for leveraging existing strengths, cultural homogeneity, shared ethnic identity, and doctrinal convergences, to mitigate the spillover effects of broader religious polarization. Policymakers and religious organizations could draw on this by promoting localized interfaith education programs, youth-led peace initiatives, and collaborative community projects that emphasize common values over differences. Such approaches could complement existing national mechanisms like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council and joint CAN-NSCIA statements, offering a proactive rather than reactive framework for peacebuilding. Globally, Igboland's case provides a context-specific illustration of how minority integration in a non-hostile environment can serve as a resource for religious pluralism, with lessons for other multi-faith societies facing similar challenges of identity negotiation and external polarization. Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain boundaries. The qualitative focus on religious leaders, while providing rich interpretive depth, may not fully capture the perspectives of laypersons, youth, or women in everyday settings. Future research could expand through mixed-methods designs, incorporating surveys or longitudinal observations to track evolving interfaith dynamics amid Nigeria's changing socio-political landscape. Additional studies might explore comparative cases in other southern regions (like southwest Nigeria) or examine the role of digital platforms and media in shaping perceptions of harmony versus tension. In sum, the pathways to peaceful living in Igboland, rooted in historical accommodation, shared theological commitments, and practical collaboration, demonstrate that interfaith harmony is not only possible but already operative in parts of Nigeria. By recognizing and building upon these existing strengths, both Muslim and Christian communities can continue to model coexistence that contributes to national stability and offers hope for more harmonious religious relations across diverse contexts.

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