



# **Tribalism and Conflict in Nigeria: An Exploratory Survey-Based Study**

*By*

*Ogbuenyi Precious Nkem*

*Director of Development, Heart of Unity and Tolerance Foundation  
(The HUT Foundation)*

*September, 2025*

## Abstract

This paper explores tribalism and its relationship to peaceful coexistence and nation-building in Nigeria. Drawing on sociological theory and historical analysis, it examines how colonial-era policies of divide-and-rule created rigid ethnic boundaries that persist in contemporary Nigerian politics. The study argues that tribalism in Nigeria is not merely the result of ancient animosities, but rather a political tool employed by elites to mobilise support and maintain power through the manipulation of ethnic identities and grievances.

By analysing Nigeria's colonial legacy and post-independence political landscape—including the 1953 Kano riots, the Biafran Civil War, and contemporary electoral politics—this research exposes how deeply rooted ethnic divisions have undermined national unity and fostered recurring cycles of violence. The paper evaluates existing legal frameworks designed to promote national integration and questions their effectiveness in addressing tribalism at its root.

Additionally, this study utilises survey data focused on young urban Nigerians to examine how tribalism has affected their interactions with other Nigerians and their sense of national identity. A significant proportion of respondents report having been directly affected by tribal conflict. It is the aim of this research that these findings will encourage policy reform and government action to address the structural conditions that perpetuate ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

---

**Keywords:** *tribalism, ethnic conflict, Nigeria, elite manipulation, national cohesion*

---

## Introduction

In 1953, southern politicians (predominantly Yoruba and Igbo) moved a motion in the House of Representatives in Lagos for "Self-Government in 1956." Northern leaders, feeling they were not ready for independence and fearing southern domination, rejected the timeline and were jeered at upon exiting the House.

When a southern delegation visited Kano to campaign for independence in May of the same year, they were met with hostility. For four days, violent clashes broke out between the Hausa-Fulani and southern residents of Kano. Approximately 36 people were killed and hundreds injured. This marked the first time that political disagreements in Lagos led to large-scale, lethal ethnic violence in the streets of a northern city.

This was one of many conflicts involving both greater and smaller numbers of casualties. When a group of people who share social identities such as tribe or religion feel slighted, suppressed, or economically threatened by people of another tribe, it creates fertile ground for hatred to grow. When such hatred festers, it boils over into violence, leading to loss of life and property, and a reinforcement of previously held biases. Whilst amalgamation occurred in 1914, as

scholars have noted, individuals continued to hold onto their original identities rather than embracing the broader, newer identity of Nigeria.

The link between identity politics and conflict: To understand why we fight, we must first consider the factors that shape our identities—the defining elements from which we seemingly cannot detach ourselves. Nigeria is a country of vast diversity with a history of civil war in which tribalism was among the sparks that ignited a deadly conflict resulting in massive loss of life. After the war, citizens increasingly turned to identifying factors to separate themselves or align with different groups. A case in point is the region termed the South-South of Nigeria. Many scholars argue that this designation makes little geographical sense and is a product of the war, with those in the Niger Delta Basin deliberately distinguishing themselves from South-Easterners and aligning more closely with the Nigerian federal forces who emerged victorious. This demonstrates the direct link between conflict and identity formation.

Another angle to consider is the importance citizens place on identifying factors. "He speaks the same language I do, therefore he is my person." When people find themselves in new or unfamiliar environments, the instinct is to seek out those most similar to them. In the case of Nigeria, tribe is the first marker to which people turn. In situations of conflict, there is a rallying of the similar against the dissimilar.

There is also the exaggeration of differences. For example, a Kanuri group might explain why they are superior to the Hausa, emphasising that they speak a different language whilst ignoring the religion both groups share, their racial similarities, and their geographical proximity. Differences are thus magnified to justify claims of superiority and to rationalise violence carried out against a rival tribe. The fear of change or the economic advancement of someone from a different tribe also serves as a factor that heightens differences based on identity and provides justification for violence. In the case of the Kano riots which erupted in the Sabon Gari area—a settlement where migrants from other parts of Nigeria had established themselves and achieved greater economic success than locals—these factors played a role in fuelling the hatred that eventually boiled over into four days of brutal violence and wanton destruction of property. These markers have become central to our identity, and to threaten them is to threaten our very sense of self.

Research gap: Studies typically take a generalised approach to conflict and tribalism, but this research observes the phenomenon through the lived experiences of youths residing in urban areas of Nigeria. By examining the prevalence of tribalism, shared experiences, and suggestions for change amongst this demographic—from whom future leaders are likely to emerge—this study seeks to contribute to the development of effective solutions. Nigeria is a large country of over 200 million people, and to reach a future where tribe is no longer elevated over a sense of nationhood, deep-rooted changes must occur.

Study objectives and research questions: This study examines the problems associated with tribalism, the factors that encourage it, the effects of tribalism, conflict resulting from tribal tensions, the policies currently in place and their effectiveness, and proposed solutions offered both by citizens themselves and by the author of this paper.

## Literature Review

### Ethnic Identity and Conflict Theory

In sociology, "ethnic identity" is not simply a box checked when filling out a form. It is a deeply personal yet socially constructed sense of belonging built on shared history, language, religion, or ancestry. Sociologist Fredrik Barth argued that ethnicity is not primarily about what exists within the group (such as specific traditions) but rather about the boundary between "us" and "them"—we know who we are partly by defining who we are not.

There are two principal approaches to understanding ethnic identity. First, there is primordialism, a term coined by American sociologist Edward Shils, which holds that ethnicity is fixed, ancient, and inherent. Most modern sociologists find this approach too rigid. Second, there is constructivism, which maintains that ethnic identity is fluid and can be magnified or suppressed depending on the situation—such as feeling "more Igbo" during the New Yam Festival or "more Nigerian" when travelling abroad.

Conflict theory, heavily rooted in the theories of Karl Marx, provides a framework for understanding ethnic tensions. Whilst Marx focused on class, modern conflict theorists apply his logic to issues including race and ethnicity. The core premise is that society is not a harmonious system in which every component functions smoothly together. Rather, society is characterised by competition for limited resources, with the dominant group creating the "rules" that determine who receives what or nothing at all. The dominant group maintains its power precisely because it controls the mechanisms to preserve it. Conflict theorists argue that the only way marginalised or weaker groups can secure what they need is through conflict, by challenging those in power to restructure the system. When this occurs, it often results in what can be described as ethnic conflict.

When these concepts are synthesised, it becomes clear that "ethnic conflicts" are rarely merely about cultural differences but are instead rooted in resistance to oppression or competition for resources. Ethnic identity becomes a tool for mobilisation. Groups are not simply fighting over "culture"; they are fighting over jobs, land, or political representation.

There is also the factor of elite manipulation, whereby leaders activate ethnic identities to manipulate people's emotions in order to achieve objectives that benefit themselves. They tell their group, "The reason you don't have a job is because that other group took it." This dimension will be explored more extensively in later sections of this paper.

As disagreements escalate and, in some cases, develop into full-blown conflicts, boundaries that were previously fluid amongst groups begin to harden, as the groups in question come to view the conflict as a matter of survival.

## **Tribalism in Post-Colonial African States**

The African continent is home to over 3,000 tribes and a multitude of languages, and it is no stranger to tribal conflict, both in pre-colonial and post-colonial periods. Whilst tribal trade, alliances, and treaties have long existed, so too have tribal clashes and devastating wars. Notable ethnic conflicts that escalated into full-scale wars include the Second Congo War, the Rwandan genocide, the Sudanese wars, and Nigeria's civil war. These conflicts have resulted in the loss of nearly 10 million lives. Tribalism, if not handled with appropriate care and sensitivity, can lead to devastating loss that scars populations for generations.

Before European colonisation (the "Scramble for Africa"), ethnic identities in many regions were fluid. People moved, intermarried, and spoke multiple languages. A person might be a farmer one day and a trader the next, and their identity could shift with their occupation or location.

Colonial "labelling" began when European powers such as Britain, France, and Belgium arrived. Needing to manage millions of people with a small number of administrators, they employed a "divide and rule" strategy. They took those fluid identities and froze them, creating fixed ethnic boundaries. One method was to create "tribal" maps and insist that every person belonged to exactly one "tribe."

In places such as Rwanda, the Belgian administration introduced mandatory identity cards, officially labelling people as "Hutu" or "Tutsi" based on arbitrary physical traits or the number of cattle they owned. This transformed a flexible social distinction into a rigid, permanent "ethnic" identity.

Colonialism also established a hierarchical system in which certain tribes were granted elevated positions, whilst others were entirely excluded from such opportunities. To maintain control, colonial powers often selected "favourite" groups, providing them with better education, civil service positions, or military roles. This was not accidental. By positioning one group as superior to others, the colonisers ensured that groups would be preoccupied with internal rivalries rather than uniting against the colonial government.

When colonial powers withdrew (mostly during the 1950s and 1960s), they left behind states with artificial borders. These borders divided ethnic groups—for instance, the Somali people were split amongst five different countries—and also lumped rival groups together. Communities that had historically been adversaries were suddenly told they were now "citizens" of the same newly independent country.

In the post-colonial era, "tribalism" evolved into a competition for state resources rather than an expression of ancient hatreds. In many new nations, the government was the only source of wealth (jobs, infrastructure, contracts). If your "tribe" controlled the presidency, your village received infrastructure development and your relatives secured employment. Politicians realised that the most effective way to maintain power was to mobilise ethnic identity. Instead of campaigning on complex policy platforms, they could claim, "If you don't vote for me, that other group will take everything. It is our turn to rule."

Such tactics become particularly effective when resources are scarce (low GDP, limited employment opportunities). People retreat into the perceived "security" of their ethnic group, and the "us versus them" boundary hardens because "us" becomes the only group perceived as protective.

## **Nigerian Case Studies (Elections, Civil War Legacy, Zoning Politics)**

The British strategy in Nigeria was termed Indirect Rule, but sociologically it represents a classic "divide and rule" manoeuvre. It was not merely about administrative efficiency; it was about ensuring that Nigerians could never unite against colonial authority.

Before 1914, "Nigeria" did not exist as a political entity. There were hundreds of independent groups consisting of the expansive Sokoto Caliphate in the North, the Yoruba kingdoms in the West, and the decentralised Igbo communities in the East.

In 1914, Lord Frederick Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates into one country. This decision was not a noble attempt to forge a unified "nation" but rather a purely economic manoeuvre to achieve "budget balancing." The South generated surplus revenue from trade, whilst the North ran a deficit. By merging them, the British could utilise Southern revenue to fund Northern administration without expending British funds.

The British did not simply amalgamate these groups; they also maintained legal and social separation. This is an instance of boundary hardening as previously discussed. The British ruled the North through the Emirs (Islamic traditional rulers) whilst restricting Western education and Christian missionary activity in the North to avoid disrupting the traditional power structure. This preserved Northern culture but also resulted in slower development in terms of "Western" political and economic institutions.

In the South, the British permitted missionaries and schools. This created a new class of educated, English-speaking Nigerians who began demanding independence. To the British, the South became a "threat." The British inferred that Southern elites were "intruders" intent on seizing the Northerners' land. Meanwhile, Southerners perceived that the North was being utilised by the British to "obstruct" progress. A direct consequence of these tribally charged preconceived notions can be seen in the 1953 Kano riots discussed earlier in this paper.

As independence approached in 1960, conflict theory predicts precisely what transpired: a scramble for control of the state. Since the British had administered the country in three distinct "blocks" (North, West, East), the political parties that formed were ethnically based. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the Hausa-Fulani (North), the Action Group (AG) represented the Yoruba (West), and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) represented the Igbo (East).

Because the British had established a system in which government control was the primary route to wealth, each group feared that if another group won elections, their own people would be marginalised or impoverished. This represents zero-sum competition: if you win, I must lose.

The British departed in 1960, but the "divide and rule" architecture remained intact. Ethnic identities remained firmly entrenched, if not stronger than before. People often identified as "Igbo" or "Hausa" first and "Nigerian" second, because colonial law had treated them this way for 50 years. This tension eventually led to the Biafran Civil War (1967–1970). The conflict resulted from deep-seated ethnic, political, and economic tensions, primarily stemming from the marginalisation of the Igbo people in the East by the Northern-dominated government. Tensions escalated following a failed coup and subsequent anti-Igbo pogroms in the North. Control of oil resources in the Niger Delta was a major strategic factor, and the conflict erupted after the Eastern Region declared independence as Biafra, prompting the federal government to preserve national unity.

## **Elite Manipulation and Grievance Theory**

If conflict theory explains the "what" (the struggle for resources), then elite manipulation and grievance theory explain the "how." Underperforming leaders successfully employ these two mechanisms to perpetuate ethnic competition and serve as distractions from governance failures.

In sociology, elite theory posits that power is invariably concentrated in the hands of a small minority (the elites). In the Nigerian context, "elite manipulation" suggests that ethnic conflict is not a spontaneous, bottom-up eruption of "ancient hatred" but rather a top-down construction by leaders seeking to protect their own interests.

Consider a politician who has failed to provide electricity or adequate infrastructure. According to this theory, instead of addressing their failures, they "play the ethnic card." They distract their ethnic group by claiming, "The reason you have no power is because people from the other region are stealing your resources." Simultaneously, the elite presents themselves as the only "shield" against the other group, stating, "If you don't vote for me, that other group will dominate you."

If elite manipulation is the match, grievance theory is the fuel. This theory suggests that conflict occurs when a group experiences relative deprivation—not simply poverty, but the perception that they are poor because another group is receiving more than their fair share. This can be further explained through the concept of horizontal inequality, which refers to inequality not merely between "rich and poor" (vertical inequality) but between "Ethnic Group A and Ethnic Group B" (horizontal inequality). The situation in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta provides an apt example.

Residents there witness billions of dollars' worth of oil being extracted from beneath their land whilst their water is polluted and their youth remain unemployed. They observe the prosperous capital city of Abuja and perceive that their resources are being used to develop another region's infrastructure. This intense sense of grievance makes it relatively easy for local leaders (or militants) to mobilise people for resistance.

Elites may be motivated by self-interest (seeking to maintain power to access oil revenues), but they exploit the genuine grievances of the population (poverty, marginalisation) to recruit them into the struggle. A leader without a grievance to exploit has no base of support; a population with grievances but no leadership often has no voice. Both elements are required for conflict to ignite.

During the 2023 election, elite manipulation was prominently displayed. Politicians employed "dog-whistle" politics, using phrases that appear innocuous to outsiders but signal "us versus them" to their base. A notable example occurred when a presidential aspirant used the Yoruba phrase "emi lokan" (meaning "it is my turn") whilst addressing members of his ethnic group at a political rally.

Astroturfing was also extensively employed during the election period. Politicians utilised social media bots to create the illusion of massive ethnic grassroots movements, when a small number of powerful individuals actually funded these. These bots were also deployed to amplify divisive voices amongst ethnic groups, thereby strengthening harmful biases and fuelling inter-ethnic hatred.

## Methodology

### Research Design: Exploratory Survey

This study adopts an exploratory research design, employing a survey method to examine perceptions and lived experiences of tribalism and its relationship to conflict and national cohesion in Nigeria. An exploratory approach is particularly appropriate given the study's objective of understanding how individuals interpret, experience, and make sense of tribal identity and inter-ethnic relations, rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis.

Exploratory surveys are widely used in conflict and peace studies where the aim is to identify patterns, attitudes, and emerging themes that may inform deeper future research. In this context, the survey allows for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, capturing not only the prevalence of perceived tribalism but also respondents' interpretations of its causes, effects, and possible solutions.

---

### Sample Size and Selection

The study draws on responses from 37 Nigerian participants, selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Participants were recruited digitally and voluntarily, with the aim of capturing a diverse cross-section of Nigerians, particularly in terms of ethnic background, age, gender, and religious affiliation.



While the sample size is modest, it is appropriate for an exploratory study intended to generate insight rather than generalisable conclusions. The respondents predominantly fall within the youth and young adult demographic, largely between the ages of 25 and 38, a group that is especially relevant given their role as future political leaders, voters, and opinion-shapers within Nigerian society.

The sample includes individuals from multiple ethnic backgrounds, including major and minority groups, thereby allowing for cross-tribal perspectives on the phenomenon of tribalism. This diversity strengthens the study's ability to identify shared experiences and perceptions that cut across ethnic lines.

---

## Data Collection Method

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire, designed to assess respondents' views on tribal identity, personal experiences of tribalism, and perceptions of its role in conflict and national disunity in Nigeria. The questionnaire contained a combination of:

- **Closed-ended questions**, using multiple-choice and Likert-scale formats to measure attitudes towards tribal identity and perceived conflict drivers.
- **Open-ended questions**, allowing respondents to elaborate on personal experiences and propose solutions to tribalism in Nigeria.

The use of an online survey facilitated participation from respondents in different locations while ensuring ease of access and anonymity. Responses were automatically recorded and organised into a spreadsheet for analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to identify trends and patterns in the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative responses.

---

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. No personally identifying information—such as names, addresses, or contact details—was collected.

Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all data were used strictly for academic research purposes. Given the sensitive nature of tribalism and conflict in Nigeria, questions were framed carefully to avoid incitement, blame, or the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Participants were free to withdraw at any point without consequence.

## Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. While the responses provide valuable insight into perceptions of tribalism among urban Nigerian youth, they cannot be assumed to represent the views of the Nigerian population as a whole.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal bias, memory limitations, or social desirability effects. Respondents may underreport or overemphasise experiences of tribalism based on personal interpretation or emotional response.

Third, the use of an online survey may exclude individuals without reliable internet access, potentially skewing the sample towards more educated or urban respondents. Despite these limitations, the study remains valuable as an exploratory investigation into the lived experiences and perceptions of tribalism in Nigeria and provides a foundation for more extensive future research.

## Findings and Data Analysis

### Descriptive Statistics: Percentages and Trends

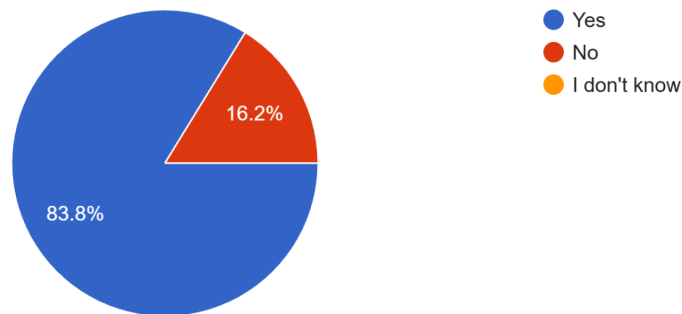
This section presents findings from the survey conducted among 37 Nigerian respondents, analysing patterns relating to tribal identity, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of tribalism's role in conflict and national cohesion.

#### Parental Tribal Background

A substantial majority of respondents (**83.8%**) reported that both parents belong to the same tribe, while only **16.2%** indicated inter-tribal parentage.

Are both your parents from the same tribe?

37 responses



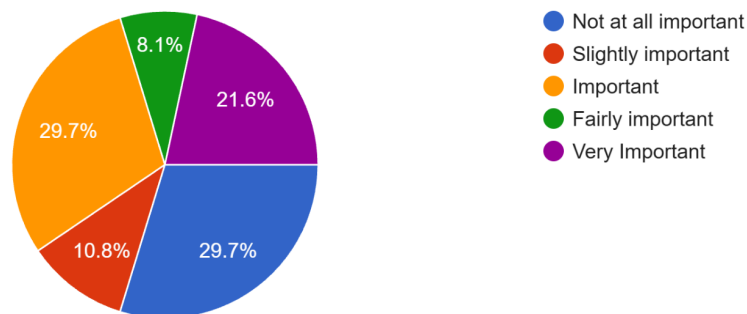
This finding suggests that tribal identity in Nigeria is largely transmitted and reinforced at the family level, supporting sociological arguments that ethnic affiliation is socialised early in life and embedded within household structures.

### Importance of Tribal Identity

Responses regarding the importance of tribal identity revealed a nuanced pattern. While **29.7%** of respondents stated that tribal identity was *not at all important* to them, a combined **70.3%** assigned at least some degree of importance to it. Specifically, **29.7%** described it as *important*, **21.6%** as *very important*, and the remainder as *slightly* or *fairly important*.

How important is your tribal identity to you?

37 responses



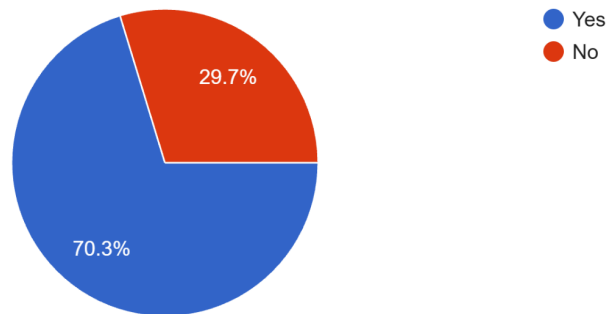
This distribution indicates that although many Nigerians may consciously reject tribalism, tribal identity remains psychologically salient for a significant proportion of the population. Such latent salience is particularly relevant in conflict situations, where identity markers tend to become more pronounced.

## Experience of Tribal Discrimination

When asked whether they had ever experienced discrimination or prejudice based on tribal affiliation, **70.3%** of respondents answered in the affirmative, while **29.7%** reported no such experience.

Have you ever experienced discrimination or prejudice because of your tribal affiliation?

37 responses



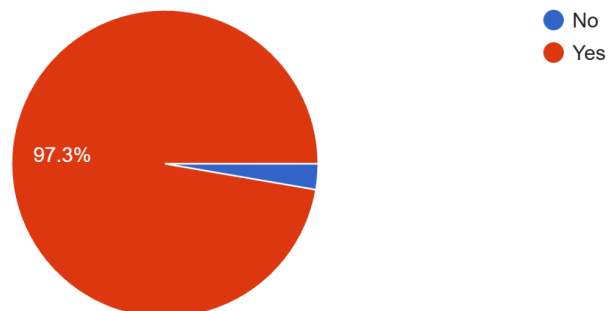
This high proportion demonstrates that tribalism is not merely a perceived societal issue but one that manifests in tangible, lived experiences.

## Perception of Tribalism as a National Problem

An overwhelming **97.3%** of respondents agreed that tribalism constitutes a major problem in Nigeria, with only **2.7%** disagreeing.

Do you believe that tribalism is a major problem in Nigeria?

37 responses



This near-unanimous consensus underscores the widespread recognition of tribalism as a critical challenge to national unity, governance, and peace.

### **Tribalism and National Unity**

Most respondents indicated that tribalism negatively affects national unity and development, reinforcing the argument that ethnic identity, when politicised, undermines collective nationhood and fuels distrust between groups.

---

## **Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis, revealing several recurring themes.

### **1. Political Exploitation of Tribal Identity**

Many respondents identified political actors as primary drivers of tribalism. Respondents frequently noted that politicians exploit ethnic identity during elections to mobilise support, distract from governance failures, and deepen divisions. This theme aligns closely with elite manipulation theory discussed earlier in the paper.

### **2. Socialisation and Normalisation of Tribal Bias**

Several respondents observed that tribalism is learned early through family, social interactions, and community narratives. Casual stereotypes, jokes, and everyday language were cited as mechanisms through which prejudice is normalised, even among individuals who consciously reject tribal hatred.

### **3. Impact on Social Trust and Interaction**

Respondents described tribalism as eroding trust, particularly in professional and political environments. Some noted preferential treatment based on shared language or tribe, while others reported exclusion or suspicion when interacting with people from different ethnic backgrounds.

### **4. Education and National Orientation as Solutions**

A dominant theme in proposed solutions was the need for improved civic education. Respondents emphasised teaching Nigerian history in a way that promotes shared identity rather than ethnic competition. National integration initiatives and early education were viewed as essential to long-term change.

## 5. Accountability and Leadership Responsibility

Respondents stressed that meaningful reduction of tribalism requires accountability, particularly for public figures who engage in hate speech or ethnic dog-whistling. Leadership was widely viewed as central either to perpetuating or dismantling tribal divisions.

---

## Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that tribalism in Nigeria is widely recognised as a serious national problem, frequently experienced at a personal level, and deeply intertwined with political mobilisation and socialisation processes. While many respondents claim that tribal identity is not personally important to them, their lived experiences suggest that it continues to shape social relations and conflict dynamics in significant ways.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for several key theoretical frameworks explored in the literature review, particularly constructivist approaches to ethnic identity, conflict theory, elite manipulation, and grievance theory. By examining the lived experiences and perceptions of young urban Nigerians, this research demonstrates how tribalism in Nigeria operates not as a static or ancient phenomenon, but as a socially reinforced and politically activated identity system with tangible consequences for peace and national cohesion.

### Tribal Identity as Socially Constructed and Context-Dependent

The finding that over 70 per cent of respondents assign at least some importance to tribal identity, despite many claiming it is not central to their self-conception, strongly aligns with constructivist theories of ethnicity. As Barth argues, ethnic identity is defined not by fixed cultural content but by social boundaries that become salient in specific contexts. The survey results suggest that tribal identity in Nigeria often exists in a dormant state—present but not always foregrounded—until activated by political competition, perceived threat, or social exclusion.

This latent salience helps explain why tribalism resurfaces so prominently during elections or periods of instability. Respondents' acknowledgement of tribalism as a national problem, coupled with their own experiences of discrimination, indicates that identity boundaries harden under pressure, reinforcing an "us versus them" dynamic that mirrors constructivist accounts of boundary formation.

## Family Socialisation and the Reproduction of Ethnic Identity

The predominance of same-tribe parentage among respondents supports sociological perspectives that view ethnic identity as **intergenerationally transmitted**. Tribal affiliation is not merely adopted in adulthood but learned through family narratives, language use, and social expectations from an early age. This finding reinforces the argument that tribalism in Nigeria is sustained through everyday socialisation processes, rather than solely through overt political mobilisation.

The thematic analysis further demonstrates how casual stereotypes and normalised biases contribute to the reproduction of tribal identity, even among individuals who consciously reject ethnic prejudice. This underscores the difficulty of dismantling tribalism without addressing the informal social mechanisms that sustain it.

## Conflict Theory and Competition for State Resources

Respondents' widespread perception that tribalism undermines national unity directly reflects **conflict theory's** emphasis on competition over scarce resources. In the Nigerian context, where the state remains the primary distributor of wealth and opportunity, ethnic identity becomes a tool for navigating structural inequality. The high proportion of respondents who reported experiencing tribal discrimination suggests that access to employment, political inclusion, and social trust is often perceived through an ethnic lens.

This perception of zero-sum competition—where the advancement of one group is believed to come at the expense of another—mirrors classical conflict theory predictions. The data indicate that tribalism functions as a rational response to structural conditions rather than an irrational attachment to cultural difference.

## Elite Manipulation and Political Mobilisation

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the qualitative responses is the role of political elites in exacerbating tribal divisions. This finding strongly supports elite manipulation theory, which posits that leaders activate ethnic identities to secure power and deflect accountability. Respondents repeatedly identified election periods as moments when tribal rhetoric intensifies, suggesting that ethnic mobilisation is strategic rather than spontaneous.

This perception aligns with historical patterns in Nigerian politics, where ethnically aligned parties and zoning arrangements have institutionalised tribal competition. The data suggest that citizens are acutely aware of this manipulation, yet remain affected by its consequences, highlighting the paradox whereby individuals recognise elite-driven division but are still constrained by the structures it produces.

## Grievance Theory and Lived Experiences of Inequality

The high proportion of respondents who have experienced tribal discrimination lends empirical weight to **grievance theory**, particularly the concept of relative deprivation. Respondents' experiences suggest that tribalism is often felt most acutely in everyday interactions—employment, social acceptance, and political participation—rather than only during episodes of overt violence.

These grievances create fertile ground for mobilisation, as individuals interpret personal setbacks as collective injustices inflicted by rival groups. The survey findings therefore demonstrate how grievance and elite manipulation operate synergistically: grievances provide the emotional fuel, while elites supply the narrative framework through which those grievances are politicised.

## Implications for Peacebuilding and National Cohesion

Taken together, the findings suggest that tribalism in Nigeria persists not because of immutable cultural differences, but because of **structural incentives, political strategies, and social reinforcement mechanisms**. Respondents' emphasis on education, accountability, and leadership responsibility indicates a recognition that sustainable peace requires interventions at both institutional and cultural levels.

The data support the argument that peacebuilding efforts must move beyond symbolic unity campaigns to address the political economy of ethnic competition, the role of leadership rhetoric, and the everyday socialisation processes that reproduce tribal bias. Without such comprehensive engagement, tribalism is likely to remain a recurring fault line in Nigeria's conflict landscape.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between tribalism and conflict in Nigeria through an exploratory survey of young Nigerians, situating their lived experiences within established theories of ethnic identity and conflict. The findings demonstrate that tribalism in Nigeria is neither an abstract nor historical phenomenon alone; it is a contemporary social reality that continues to shape political behaviour, social interaction, and perceptions of national belonging.

The data reveal that while many Nigerians may consciously downplay the importance of tribal identity, it remains a powerful latent marker that becomes particularly salient in moments of competition, uncertainty, or political mobilisation. The high prevalence of reported experiences of tribal discrimination underscores the extent to which ethnic identity influences everyday life, reinforcing distrust and weakening social cohesion. These findings lend strong empirical support to constructivist theories of ethnicity, which view identity as fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed.



Furthermore, the study confirms the relevance of conflict theory, elite manipulation, and grievance theory in explaining the persistence of tribalism in Nigeria. Competition for state-controlled resources, combined with the strategic activation of ethnic identity by political elites, sustains an environment in which tribal divisions are both politically profitable and socially entrenched. Grievances arising from perceived marginalisation or inequality further intensify these divisions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that undermines peacebuilding efforts.

By focusing on young urban Nigerians, this research highlights the perspectives of a demographic that will play a decisive role in shaping Nigeria's future political and social landscape. Their recognition of tribalism as a major national problem, alongside their proposed solutions, suggests both awareness of the issue and a readiness for reform. However, without structural and institutional change, individual goodwill alone will be insufficient to dismantle entrenched systems of ethnic competition.

Ultimately, this study argues that tribalism in Nigeria persists not because of irreconcilable cultural differences, but because it is continuously reproduced through political incentives, socialisation processes, and governance failures. Addressing it therefore requires deliberate, sustained intervention at multiple levels of society.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed to address tribalism and reduce its contribution to conflict in Nigeria:

### **1. Strengthen Civic and Historical Education**

There is a need for comprehensive reform of civic and history education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Nigerian history should be taught in a manner that emphasises shared struggles, interdependence, and collective nation-building rather than ethnic competition. Early education should explicitly challenge tribal stereotypes and promote critical thinking around identity, power, and inclusion.

### **2. Enforce Accountability for Divisive Political Rhetoric**

Existing laws and electoral regulations addressing hate speech and incitement must be more consistently enforced. Political actors who engage in ethnic dog-whistling or divisive rhetoric should face tangible consequences, including disqualification or legal sanction where appropriate. Electoral bodies and media regulators should collaborate to monitor and penalise ethnically inflammatory messaging, particularly during election periods.

### **3. Promote Inclusive Governance and Merit-Based Institutions**

Reducing the incentive for ethnic mobilisation requires strengthening institutions that prioritise merit, transparency, and fairness. Recruitment and promotion in public service should be demonstrably merit-based, with oversight mechanisms to prevent ethnic favouritism. When citizens perceive institutions as fair, reliance on tribal identity as a survival mechanism diminishes.

### **4. Reform National Integration Policies**

Existing national integration initiatives, such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), should be re-evaluated and strengthened rather than treated as symbolic programmes. Placement policies should encourage meaningful cross-cultural interaction, and participants should receive structured dialogue and conflict-resolution training to deepen inter-ethnic understanding.

### **5. Responsible Media and Digital Platform Regulation**

Media organisations and social media platforms play a critical role in shaping public discourse. Journalists and content creators should receive training on conflict-sensitive reporting, while platforms should be encouraged to address algorithmic amplification of divisive content. Transparency in political advertising and action against coordinated disinformation campaigns are essential to curbing ethnic polarisation.

### **6. Support Grassroots Dialogue and Community-Level Peacebuilding**

Finally, peacebuilding efforts should extend beyond national policy to local communities. Grassroots dialogue programmes that bring together individuals from different ethnic backgrounds can help dismantle stereotypes and rebuild trust. Civil society organisations should be supported to facilitate these initiatives, particularly in regions with histories of ethnic tension.

## **Final Reflection**

While this study is exploratory in nature, it provides valuable insight into how tribalism is experienced, understood, and perpetuated in contemporary Nigeria. By combining empirical data with established theory, it contributes to a growing body of research that challenges simplistic explanations of ethnic conflict and calls for structural, not merely symbolic, solutions. Further research with larger and more diverse samples would deepen understanding and support the development of more targeted interventions.

## References

- Baydhowi Baydhowi, et al. (2023). *Perception of threat and national identity: Investigation of the mediating role of collective self-esteem*. CelPress.
- Cederman, Lars-Erik, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min. (2010). *Why do ethnic groups rebel? New data and analysis*. World Politics 62 1 (87-119).
- Curle, Clint. (2020). *Us vs. Them: The process of othering*. Canadian Museum for Human Rights.
- Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T. Suberu. (2005). *A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria*. Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity.
- Emmanuel Achus Jah, et al. (2023). *Identity Conflict in Nigeria: An Analytical Deconstruct*. Nigerian Army University.
- Mariotti, Claudia. (2022). *Elite Theory*. 10.1007/978-3-030-44556-0\_67.
- Nelson, Ediom-Ubong Ekpo and Emmanuel J. Umontuen. (2022). *Identity Politics and Conflict in Nigeria: A Criminological Focus on Oil and Oil Producing Communities in the Niger Delta*. University of Uyo.
- Parmar, Alpa, Rod Earle, Coretta Phillips. (2022). *The British Journal of Criminology*. Volume 63, Issue 4. 811–827.
- Pizzolo, Paolo. (2022). *The Greed versus Grievance Theory and the 2011 Libyan Civil War: Why grievance offers a wider perspective for understanding the conflict outbreak*. Small Wars Journals.
- Varshney, Ashutosh. (2009). *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. 274–294.